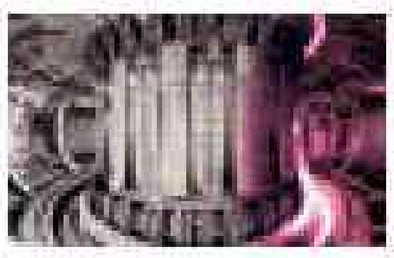


**N-POWER** FUSION PROJECT
A game changer **43**

**TRIBUTE** LATA MANGESHKAR
Lingering melody **81**

# FRONTLINE

MARCH 11, 2022 INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE HTTPS://FRONTLINE.THEHINDU.COM RS.125

## MANUFACTURING CONFLICT

The hijab controversy is part of the right wing's project to turn coastal Karnataka into a Hindutva laboratory since the 1990s, which has got a fillip from the Basavaraj Bommai government's aggressive communal push

VISIT…

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

# FRONTLINE

VOLUME 39 NUMBER 05 FEBRUARY 26-MARCH 11, 2022 ISSN 0970-1710 HTTPS://FRONTLINE.THEHINDU.COM 116 PAGES

## ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

Uttar Pradesh: Down to the wire 28
Goa: A vote for change? 32
Interview: Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi 35
Manipur: Dominant issue is territorial integrity 38

## PARTY AFFAIRS

Cracks in Trinamool Congress 40

## NUCLEAR ENERGY

Game-changing achievement in nuclear fusion 43

## JAMMU & KASHMIR

Journalists under attack 49

## CONTROVERSY

Tamil Nadu: Tussle over NEET exemption Bill 54

## LABOUR ISSUES

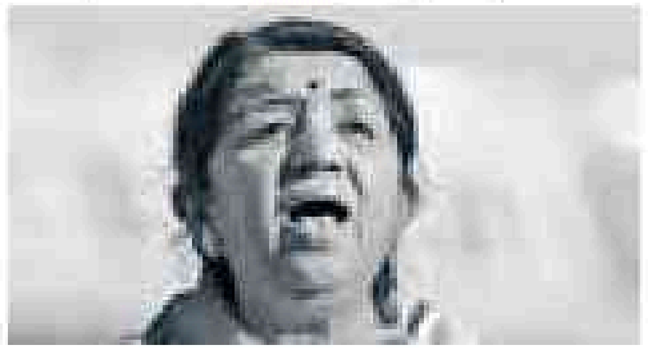
Haryana: ICDS workers' strike for promised pay rise 56

## LIVELIHOOD ISSUES

Parliament panel report on neglect of MGNREGA 60

## TRIBUTE

Rahul Bajaj: Unparalleled legacy 64



Lata Mangeshkar: Lingering melody 81

## COVER STORY

Tearing the social fabric
The hijab controversy is a part of the Hindu right wing's strategy of alienating Muslims by creating an 'us versus them' narrative. Observers see the entire controversy as a ploy to gain political capital. 4

## RELATED STORIES

Denying agency of choice 10
'Purdah' for men, too 12
Victimising women 14
Veiled threat to education 17
The paradox of hijab 21
Coming to a head in France 25

**On the Cover**
Students who were not allowed to attend classes while wearing the hijab, in Udupi, Karnataka, on February 17.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHAILENDRA BHOJAK/PTI
COVER DESIGN: U. UDAYA SHANKAR

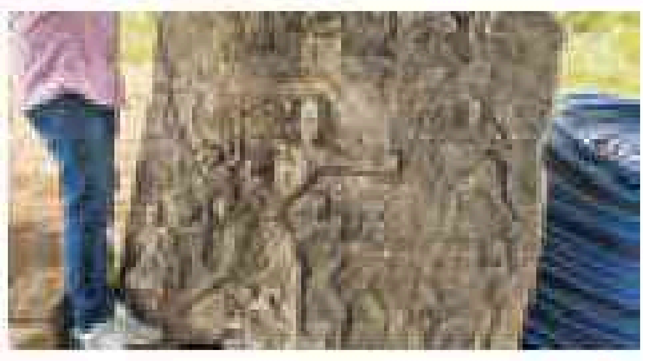
## ENVIRONMENT

Maharashtra steps up to protect urban trees 66

## WORLD AFFAIRS

A historic Russia-China summit 68
Africa: Continent of coups 72

## SPOTLIGHT



3D technology to preserve ancient inscriptions 76

## CINEMA

Chile: Records of resistance 87

## LITERATURE

"Calendar Bawa", a Tamil short story 100

## WILDLIFE

Amazing ants 102

## COLUMN

C.P. Chandrasekhar: Markets at turning point 52
BOOKS 91

Air Surcharge:
Colombo - Rs.20.00 and
Port Blair - Rs.15.00

For subscription queries and delivery related issues Contact: Pan-India Toll Free No: 1800 102 1878 or customercare@thehindu.co.in

**Disclaimer:** Readers are requested to verify & make appropriate enquiries to satisfy themselves about the veracity of an advertisement before responding to any published in this magazine.THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., the Publisher & Owner of this magazine, does not vouch for the authenticity of any advertisement or advertiser or for any of the advertiser's products and/or services. In no event can the Owner, Publisher, Printer, Editor, Director/s, Employees of this magazine/company be held responsible/liable in any manner whatsoever for any claims and/or damages for advertisements in this magazine.

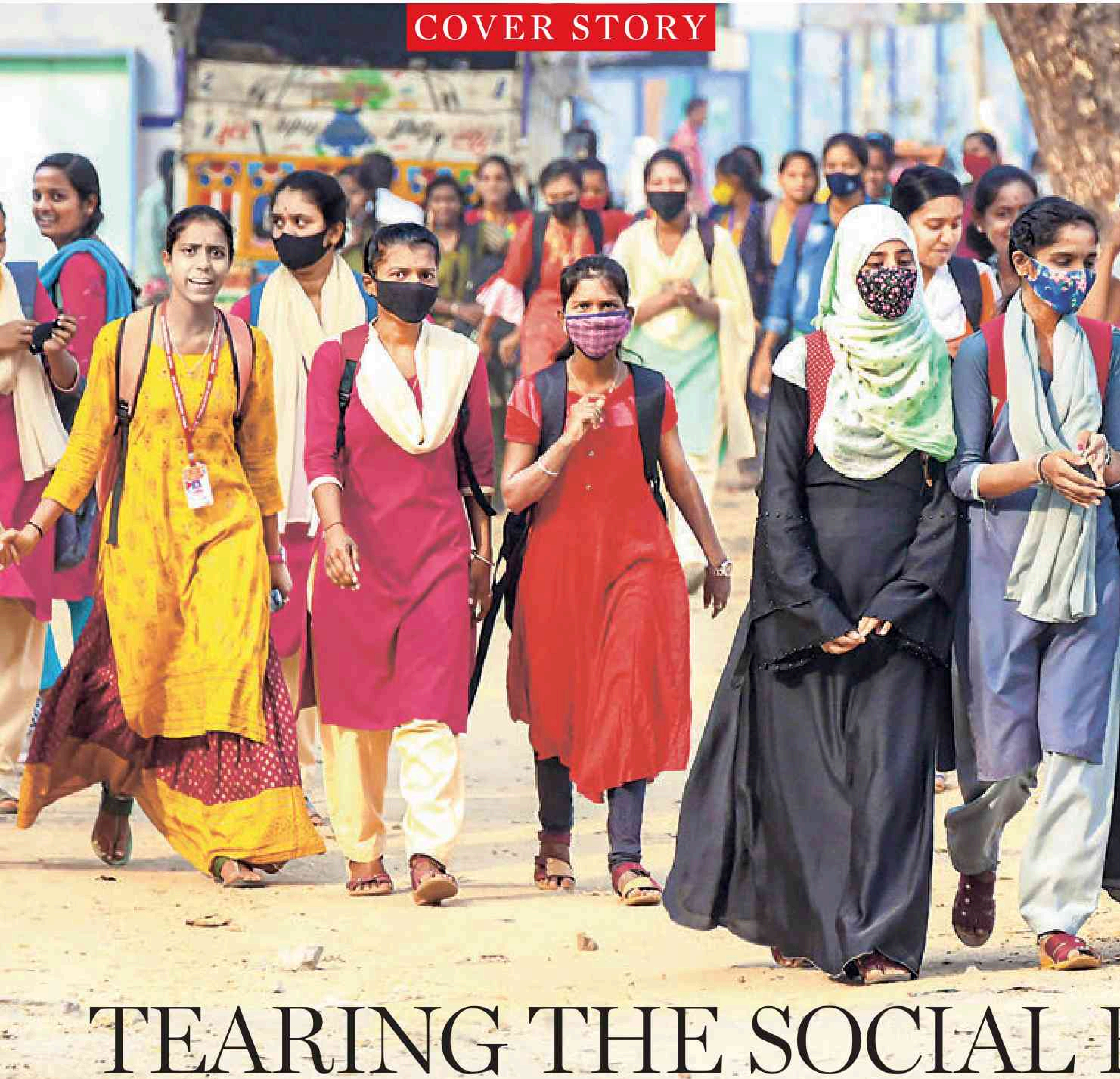
Published by N. RAVI, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600 002 and Printed by SDT Rao at Kala Jyothi Process Private Limited, Survey No. 185, Kondapur, Ranga Reddy District-500 133, Telangana on behalf of THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., Chennai-600 002.

**EDITOR:** R. VIJAYA SANKAR (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRB Act). All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited.

**e-mail:** frontline@thehindu.co.in

Frontline is not responsible for the content of external Internet sites.

COVER STORY



# TEARING THE SOCIAL

The hijab controversy is a part of the Hindu right wing’s strategy of alienating Muslims by creating an ‘us versus them’ narrative. Observers see the entire controversy as a ploy to gain political capital and gain the support of students voting for the first time in the Karnataka Assembly elections in 2023. BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

# FABRIC

PTI

**STUDENTS** arriving at a government college in Karnataka's Mandya on February 16. The police personnel on duty asked Muslim students to remove their hijab and burkha before entering the campus.

THE LAST TIME EVENTS IN COASTAL Karnataka became the focus of intense media attention was in February 2009, when a gang of young men belonging to the Sri Rama Sene (SRS), a right-wing Hindu group, stormed into a pub in Mangaluru shouting the 'Jai Sri Ram' slogan and savagely booted out young women who were having a drink. Pramod Muthalik, the head of the SRS, proudly took responsibility for the shameful attack and justified it, saying, "We are the custodians of Indian culture." Thirteen years later, in early February 2022, visuals of bedlam in several colleges of Udupi district and other districts of Karnataka were streamed into people's living rooms through television news channels and viral videos filled social media. The visuals showed college students—boys and girls—wearing saffron shawls and/or *pethas* (turbans) and screaming 'Jai Sri Ram' confronting smaller groups of Muslim girls in burkha (a long, loose garment covering the whole body) or hijab (headscarf).

Saffron-clad youth intimidated young girls, defining the boundaries of Hindutva's cultural nationalism through dress codes for women, and consequently, drawing a line between the insider and outsider. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led State government blatantly stood on the side of Hindu right-wing organisations as government colleges shut their gates on hijab-clad Muslim girls. The state's message was plain and clear: If Muslim girls wanted to access public education, they would have to conform and leave their hijabs at home; they did not have a choice.

In 2009, the girls at the pub were targeted because they were behaving 'immodestly'; ironically, in 2022, girls were targeted for clinging to a piece of cloth that, in their opinion, protected their modesty in accordance with Islamic strictures. In both instances, the message was clear: do not cross the thin wedge of territory defined by Hindutva and any one crossing that imagined boundary will be treated as the 'other' in India's mainstream. With the state's frontal role in 2022, the difference between the fringe and the centre of Hindu nationalist politics (represented by the BJP, which is in power at the Centre and in Karnataka) has ceased in the 13 years since 2009.

### THE UDUPI INCIDENT

This is why the relatively small challenge posed by six girls at the Government Girls Pre-University College in Udupi insisting on wearing the hijab inside the classroom, an issue that could have been handled at the college or district level, has drawn attention. The teenagers, who have been speaking about rights as defined in the Indian Constitution, have taken on the might of the Hindu majoritarian state. The escalation of the local issue also demonstrates how the BJP can easily manufacture controversies for communal polarisation and how these controversies form a strategic part of a well-entrenched process of alienating Muslims by creating a narrative around the binary of 'us and them' with the help of a pliant section of the media.

The success of this narrative can be gauged from the simple fact that in television news channels where this issue is discussed and in the toxic space of social media, Muslims have been cast as backward and regressive, and the hijab-wearing girls as guileless victims of patriarchy. Recently, a more dangerous manifestation of this narrative has been on display wherein Muslim girls and women are forced to remove their hijabs and burkhas outside the gates of their colleges and schools, while local media channels voyeuristically record these scenes.

Muzaffar Assadi, professor of political science at Mysore University, vehemently objected to this manufactured, widely prevalent narrative. He said: "The six girls in Udupi are resisting gender bias by clearly articulating their demands without any male presence, they are challenging the cultural nationalism of Hindutva that is forcing them to conform to a uniform notion and also questioning the stereotypical representation of hijab-clad girls as backward and trapped in a patriarchal set-up."

Long-term observers of Karnataka will not be surprised that this bizarre controversy, which hinges on the simple demand of girls to wear a headscarf, originated in the scenic and highly developed coastal strip of the State, described as the laboratory of Hindutva since the late 1990s. K. Phaniraj, a teacher at an engineering college in Manipal, said, "For me, it is not surprising that these events took place here. What has changed is the audacity, and if you observe the rise and rise of Hindutva in coastal Karnataka where every five years there is a structural change in the intimidation of Muslims, what is worrying is that this politics finds consensus in society."

For Phaniraj, the question to be posed is, "Why can't the girls come to college wearing the hijab?" Instead, the question being asked even by common people is: "Why are they coming to college with the hijab?" He said: "It is very normal that a Muslim girl would wear a hijab, and these developments display criminalising of normal life. Will Muslim girls be next made to sit separately as part of the college rules? Will it lead to criminalisation of the hijab in public places?"

The reasons for the region's severe communalisation have been discussed in the past ("Communal Cauldron", *Frontline*, September 30, 2016). The districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi (which were part of a composite district until 1997) are frequently in the news for instances of moral policing, cow vigilantism, the bogey of 'love jehad', attempted boycott of Muslim businesses, and unproven allegations of forced religious conversions. While a robust network of Sangh Parivar affiliates such as the Bajrang Dal, the Hindu Jagrana Vedike (HJV) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, along with the student body Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), are often guilty of playing a provocative role in the area, the region's relatively high proportion of Muslims has also helped the identity politics of the Popular Front of India, its student front, the Campus Front of India (CFI), and its political party, the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI). Thus, the entire hijab matter needs to be contextualised within the communal politics of coastal Karnataka along with the aggressive rightward turn of the State government under the chief ministership of Basavaraj Bommai.

### THE ORIGIN OF THE CONTROVERSY

The six girls in Udupi began wearing the hijab in December last year after realising that there was no rule banning the practice. Explaining the circumstances that led to this, Aliya Assadi, 17, one of them, said: "When I joined the college for 1st PUC [Pre-University College, or Class 11] in 2020, the college authorities forced me to remove my hijab because, according to them, there was a circular that banned its wearing within the classroom. Colleges were closed after this because of COVID lockdown. When colleges reopened for 2nd PUC [Class 12] in September last year, I realised that there was no specific rule that banned the wearing of the hijab in the classroom. I urged my parents to speak to the principal, but when they went to meet him, he ignored them. Finally, I started wearing the hijab to college with my parents' support because it is my right. Since then [December 27, 2021] we haven't been allowed into the classrooms."

Eight girls initially challenged the diktat and remained outside the classroom, although two students later succumbed to pressure from the college administration. Photographs taken by local news media outlets in January, before the issue became national news, show the girls sitting in the corridor outside their classroom with notebooks in hand.

Speaking to a Kannada news channel, Hazra Shifa, a

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**OUTSIDE** Udupi's Mahatma Gandhi Memorial College on February 8, Hindu students wearing saffron shawls and turbans only to counter the Muslim girls in hijabs.

2nd PUC student, said, "In the past, our seniors were allowed to wear a shawl [hijab] in classrooms, so they should give us the same right as well. On January 1, at a meeting of the College Development Committee [CDC], our parents requested the principal and the local MLA [Member of Legislative Assembly] K. Raghupathi Bhat [chairman of the CDC] to allow us into the classrooms, but he said that if he allowed us with the hijab, then other students would wear saffron shawls. It is because of the MLA's statement that students are wearing saffron shawls all over Karnataka. Otherwise, there was no opposition to our silent struggle."

### CFI'S INVOLVEMENT

The girls reached out to the Campus Front of India to help them with their agitation because, as Shifa said, "the CFI has been proactively involved in students' issues, such as securing scholarships." The CFI became involved in the row at this point and 'guided' the students. For the hordes of journalists who have been visiting Udupi to cover the issue, the CFI's presence is hard to miss; members of this organisation were initially arranging media interactions with the girls. The CFI's involvement has led to accusations against them (and the PFI) of 'brainwashing' the students. But Shifa denied this. "This accusation is baseless. How can they brainwash us and force us into fighting for our rights?" she said.

The extent of the CFI's involvement in the entire affair is hard to determine, but its role has provided valuable ammunition for the BJP and its affiliates to paint the struggle as part of an 'international conspiracy'. Prakash Kukkehalli, general secretary, Mangaluru Division, of the HJV, told *Frontline* that the "hijab case is merely a front, but there is an international network behind this agitation. We saw this even in the anti-CAA [Citizenship (Amendment) Act] protests that were organised as part of a toolkit. The intention of all this is to demean India on the international forum."

Senior BJP members in the State, such as Home Minister Araga Jnanendra and Primary and Secondary Education Minister B.C. Nagesh, have echoed this version. Ganesh Karnik, spokesperson for the BJP, told *Frontline* that "the entire issue has been orchestrated by the CFI to impact the voting of Muslim women in the five States where elections are held."

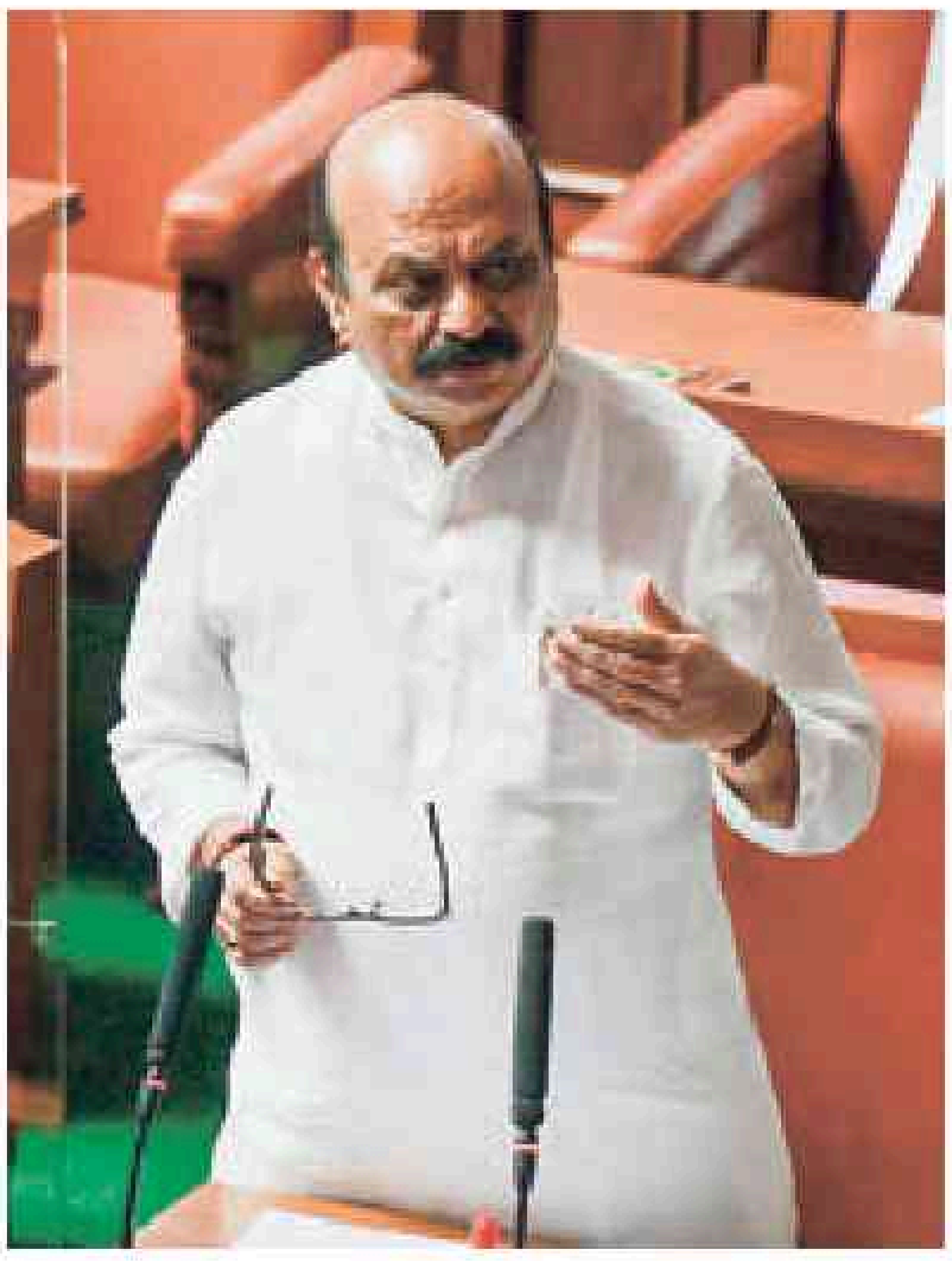
Imran P.J., the CFI's national media secretary, denied that the organisation was involved in the issue in any way apart from providing "legal advice" to the six girls on their demands, which led them to file a writ petition in the Karnataka High Court on January 31. The writ petition has sought that the wearing of a hijab be recognised as a fundamental right under Articles 14 and 25 of the Constitution as it is an essential Islamic practice. By the end of January, when the girls approached the High Court, students in a few colleges in Udupi and Chikkamagaluru had already begun to wear saffron shawls as a way of exhibiting their opposition to Muslim girls wearing headscarves. Several observers in coastal Karnataka have also pointed out how the BJP shrewdly fanned the issue to divert people's attention from the growing protests against the Central government's rejection of Sree Narayana Guru's tableau proposed by the Kerala government for the Republic Day parade. The social reformer, who died in 1928, has a large following in coastal Karnataka.

### A GOVERNMENT ORDER THAT SEGREGATES

It was after this, on February 5, that the State government issued an order that students should only wear the uniform (without headscarves) in government schools while the CDCs will have the right to decide on the issue in government pre-university colleges. According to local journalists in Udupi and Mangaluru, knowledge about the G.O. had reached educational institutions by February 3, that is even before it was officially issued, and they began barring Muslim girls from wearing headscarves from that date. Thus, 20 girls were stopped from entering the Government Pre-University College in Kundapur in Udupi district on that morning. On February 4, a government-aided college in Kundapur barred hijab-clad Muslim students even though the rule book of that college allowed the wearing of headscarves. A few other colleges in the region followed suit. While some colleges allowed girls wearing hijabs into the campus, they were made to sit separately, eerily similar to scenes from segregation-era United States where black and white students were seated separately.

By insisting that there should be not be the slightest deviation from the prescribed uniform (and consequently disallowing headscarves), the G.O. disingenuously created a false equivalence between Muslim girls who wore headscarves as part of their faith and Hindu students who wore saffron shawls *only* to counter the Muslim girls. Development educationist Niranjanaradhya V.P. told *Frontline* that “there was no history of [anyone] wearing saffron shawls or *pethas* in schools and colleges. I asked officials of the Department of Pre-University Education whether they had any data on how many students were coming dressed like this [in saffron garb], but I haven’t received any answer so far, whereas Muslim girls have been wearing hijabs to schools and colleges for a long time. Teachers and fellow students have not complained about the hijab, and it is clear that this issue has been manufactured by Hindu fundamentalists.”

Leaders of the BJP, such as Mysuru Member of Parliament Pratap Simha, endorsed the G.O. vehemently. Speaking at a press conference on February 5, Simha said, “If you want to wear the hijab and traditional Muslim pants, wear them and go to madrasas. If you Muslims want everything according to your whims, you should have gone to another country carved out in 1947. Since you chose to stay back, you have to respect the culture of the land.” Basangouda Patil Yatnal, MLA from Vijayapura City, made similar provocative statements. He said, “You want Urdu, the hijab and other Islamic necessities, then go to Pakistan.”



**BASAVARAJ BOMMAI,** Chief Minister. There has been a surge in the activities of the Hindu right wing in Karnataka since he took charge in July 2021.

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

These simmering incidents exploded on February 8 when colleges across Karnataka witnessed unruly scenes at the same time that a single judge bench of the High Court began hearing a clutch of writ petitions on the issue. At Udupi’s Mahatma Gandhi Memorial College, protests took the form of a face-off between a large group of Hindu students screaming ‘Jai Sri Ram’ and waving saffron shawls and around 50 Muslim girls who retorted with slogans of ‘We Want Justice’.

The protests soon spread like wildfire to at least 12 districts. While no right-wing Hindu organisation has admitted that at least some of the protesting students were its members, investigative reports by the digital news platform The News Minute have revealed that the protests were coordinated by social media campaigns led by ABVP and HJV members.

Significantly, many observers who have their ear to the ground have noted that the protesting students were largely drawn from backward communities. Shivamogga-based Rajendra Chenni, retired professor of English at Kuvempu University, saw the enthusiastic participation of these students as an expression of the “merging of a supra-Hindu identity with caste identities”. He added, “There are two ways in which a backward community can climb the social ladder in Hinduism: one, by imitating Brahminism, and second, by identifying and attacking the other, i.e., Muslims in this case, to prove your Hindu identity. That is why the message of Hindutva has spread so successfully among the backward castes.”

### MUSKAN’S DEFIANCE

Three scenes from the February 8 events have become emblematic of the disturbances: first, a group of students hoisting a saffron flag at the Government First Grade College in Shivamogga; second, Bibi Muskan Khan’s defiant chant of “Allah hu Akbar” in the face of a horde of saffron-clad Hindu students who were heckling the second-year BCom student of PES College of Arts, Science and Commerce in Mandya; and third, the spirited resistance of a band of around 25 students wearing blue shawls at the IDSG College in Chikkamagaluru and countering with rousing slogans of ‘Jai Bhim’ the ‘Jai Sri Ram’ of saffron shawl wearing students.

Punith A. R., a final-year student of BA (Journalism) at IDSG College, spoke to *Frontline* about what happened that day in Chikkamagaluru. “When we saw some boys wearing saffron shawls on the campus, we felt that it would increase communal feelings within the college. That’s why we wore blue shawls and raised slogans in favour of Dr B.R. Ambedkar,” Punith said. He is a Dalit and a member of a group of like-minded students consisting of Dalits, the backward castes and Muslim students in the college.

### INTERIM ORDER’S ADVERSE IMPACT

The Karnataka High Court’s single-judge bench of Justice Krishna S. Dixit referred the matter to a larger, three-judge bench comprising Chief Justice Ritu Raj Awasthi and Justices Krishna Dixit and Khazi Jaibunnisa Mohiuddin. On the first day of the hearing on February 10, the High Court issued an interim order restraining “all students regardless of their religion or faith from wearing saffron shawls (*bhagwa*), scarfs, hijab, religious flags or the like within the classroom…”. The interim order was confined to colleges “wherein the CDCs have prescribed the student dress code/uniform”.

The interim order has only added to the humiliation of hundreds of Muslim girls in schools and colleges across Karnataka as they have been forced to remove their headscarves and burkhas at the entrances before being allowed inside. Even though the order applies only to government schools and colleges which have a prescribed dress code, it has been widely misinterpreted and implemented in private schools and colleges as well. Many Muslim girls, who until recently were freely allowed to enter campuses with their headscarves, are now being forced to make a difficult choice. In disgraceful visuals that have emerged in local television media, teenage hijab-clad girls can be seen confronting the police stationed at schools and colleges who are cowing them down like petty criminals. Some Muslim girls have chosen to boycott classes rather than comply with the order, which will have a devastating impact on their education as year-end examinations are slated to be held in the next couple of months.

### HAMPERING GIRLS' EDUCATION

Vidya Dinker, a social activist based in Mangaluru said, "Muslim girls—both with and without the hijab—are thriving in educational institutions in academics as well as extracurricular activities across Dakshina Kannada and Udupi. If the court finally rules against the wearing of religious garments in colleges, this will have a huge impact as some of them may drop out of government colleges and go to Muslim institutions or even end up remaining at home which will shake the foundations of our secular democracy."

Umar U. H., a career counsellor based in Mangaluru, concurred with this observation, adding, "First, there aren't enough private Muslim institutions to cater to the demand, and second, will these poor Muslim families who send their daughters to government colleges because the fees are minimal even be able to afford the fees at private institutions?"

Niranjanaradhya, too, bemoaned that the gains made by Muslims in education would be lost. He said: "If you look at the findings of the [Rajinder] Sachar Committee report [submitted in 2006], it clearly shows how Muslims lagged behind in education. Over the past two decades, there has been an effort to catch up and they [Muslim girls] have been coming to colleges to access higher education. With girls wearing the hijab not being allowed in classrooms, there will certainly be an impact and parents may even withdraw their children rather than be part of this controversy. This will be a setback for the higher education of Muslim girls."

### BOMMAI'S HINDUTVA PUSH

The fact that the Hindu right wing has received a fillip during Basavaraj Bommai's tenure as Chief Minister is a crucial political factor that has to be accounted for in any analysis of the events surrounding the hijab controversy. Since Bommai took charge in July, there has been a surge in the activities of the Hindu right wing in Karnataka. The most egregious signal that Bommai gave to the cadre of various Hindutva organisations of his intentions was when he justified instances of moral policing as a "reaction". The social anthropologist A.R. Vasavi, who has been tracking this aggressive rightward shift of the BJP in Karnataka, says that the hijab issue is "part of a trend". "I completely anticipated that there would be communal events over the next year leading up to the 2023 elections. Social fragmentation has set in Karnataka and issues are triggered to bring out hostilities among people," she added.

In his brief tenure, Bommai has displayed a brashness and hastiness in conforming to the Sangh Parivar agenda not seen even during B.S. Yediyurappa's reign in Karnataka. Ironically, Yediyurappa was groomed in the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, the BJP's ideological parent, while Bommai has his roots in the socialist ideology of the Janata parivar which prevailed in Karnataka in the 1980s and 1990s. Apart from his signalling to the cadre of right-wing Hindu organisations that the State would back them, there have also been legislative decisions that have made the Bommai government's intentions plain: the passage of the Karnataka Religious Structures (Protection) Act, which protects illegally constructed religious structures, and the Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill, 2021 (which is yet to be passed by the Karnataka Legislative Council). In all this, "real issues of education and of political economy and welfare that have an impact on the people are not being discussed and are being sacrificed in a big way," Vasavi stated.

A. Narayana, a political commentator who is associated with Azim Premji University, said, "It is true that right-wing forces have become emboldened after Bommai took charge as he is playing the hardcore Hindutva card fully. It looks like he is proving his loyalty to the Sangh and if he doesn't do that, his position will be endangered."

P.S. Jayaramu, retired professor of political science at Bangalore University, agreed with this assessment and said, "Bommai came from the Janata parivar and had a so-called 'secular baggage'. He has felt that he has to prove his Hindutva credentials strongly and is clearly on an overdrive to establish this." According to Narayana, the BJP's intention with the whole hijab issue was to "make political capital out of it and get students who will vote for the first time in the 2023 Karnataka Assembly elections on their side." There was a chance that the whole issue would have backfired on the BJP as the controversy was tactically manufactured, but as Narayana and Jayaramu said, the High Court's intervention has "brought a reprieve for the BJP government in Karnataka" as the ball has now shifted to the judicial arena.

Back in Udupi, the six girls who are at the centre of the entire issue, which has had national and international ramifications, have not been speaking to the media since February 10 when the case began to be heard by the three-judge bench. But a statement by Shifa that sums up the entire matter continues to resonate: "How a *bindi* is a source of pride and beauty for my non-Muslim sisters, the hijab is a source of pride and beauty for me in the same way." □

# Denying agency of choice

The woman's right to wear or not wear the hijab is often not considered an independent decision. And women voices on the subject are seldom heard. BY **ZIYA US SALAM**

THE UDUPI HIJAB DEBATE HAS DIVIDED SOCIETY into halves: those who respect the students' right to dress according to their religion's instruction and those who argue that Muslim men often condition women of their community in a certain way and virtually deny them the freedom of choice. While both groups quote from the Constitution and Islamic traditions in support of their arguments, what is not stated is that the Quran does not address men alone. It speaks to humanity in gender-neutral terms. Wherever a specific verse is addressed to men, another verse or even a part of the same verse is addressed to women too. For instance, the Quran says that chaste men and women are made for each other and those not able to respect the norms of modesty are made for each other. Through Surah Noor, verse 26, we are told, "Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men for corrupt women. Good women are for good men, and good men for good women."

Interestingly, the Quran does not use the term husband with all its attendant connotations anywhere. It uses the term spouses or partners without any underlying meaning of superiority. Through Surah Tauba, verse 71, it calls men and women partners who help each other do good, prevent evil. The verse reads, "The believing men and women are protectors and helpers of each other. They (collaborate) to promote all that is good and oppose all that is evil; establish prayers and give charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those are the people whom Allah would grant mercy. Indeed, Allah is exalted and wise."

Significantly, the Quran gives both men and women the right to step out of an unhappy marriage. Nowhere does the Quran mention instant triple talaq. Surah

**MUSLIM WOMEN** going to a vote in the Assembly elections in Kairana, Uttar Pradesh, on February 10. The hijab made a beginning in India in the form of a loose single garment of cotton, usually with a cap attached to it. Some came with a veil, many without it.

PTI

Baqarah talks in detail about the process of divorce, how each pronouncement has to be separated by at least one menstrual cycle, etc. It also talks of *khula*, a woman's inalienable right to divorce. Interestingly, there is an ongoing debate in Muslim circles over whether *khula* is an absolute right of a woman to get out of an abusive or even unhappy marriage or is a man's consent necessary. Many scholars from the Indian subcontinent often subscribe to the view that a man's consent is necessary even when a woman exercises her right to divorce under *khula*. In April 2021, the Kerala High Court called *khula* a valid non-judicial form of divorce, "the form of divorce conferred upon wife similar to talaq conferred upon husband".

As in the matter of *khula*, the woman's right to wear or not wear the hijab is often not considered an independent decision. If she wears one, it is not universally respected, with many people in cosmopolitan circles arguing that the woman is doing it under family or societal pressure. If a woman does not wear the hijab, those in religious circles argue that she is doing so under social pressure. Either way, the woman is denied the agency of choice. Similar to 'love jehad' cases where practitioners of Hindutva feel that a Hindu woman is incapable of deciding for herself, that she is always tricked into marriage by lust-driven Muslim man. In the matter of the hijab, a Muslim woman is said to be under the control of either conservatives or liberals; under no situation is she given credit for what might be her personal decision. Incidentally, the Indian *burqa* is not mentioned in the Quran. It talks of women dressing modestly, covering themselves in front of men other than father, brother, son, husband or father-in-law, so as not to expose themselves to the male gaze.

Surah Noor, verse 31, gives an outline, "And enjoin believing women to cast down their looks, and guard their private parts and not reveal their adornment except that which is revealed of itself, and to draw veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornments save to their husbands, or their fathers..." In fact, two *surah*s of the Quran talk of the hijab: Noor and Al-Ahzaab. Verse 59 of Al-Ahzaab describes the way to cover the body. Addressing the wives and daughters of the Prophet and, after them, other Muslims, it says, "O Prophet, enjoin your wives and your daughters and the believing women, to draw a part of their outer coverings around them. It is likelier that they will be recognised and not molested." In everyday parlance, a loose sheet or shawl over their usual attire to conceal their modesty should suffice.

According to the Islamic scholars Mufti Abdul Dayam and Sanaullah Panipati, who wrote in *Tafseer-e-Mazhari*, "Jilbab means a sheet wrapped up on top of the usual *dupatta* or shawl". They go on to describe the circumstances of the revelation of this verse: A wife of the Prophet, Sauda, was easily recognisable in public, as she was quite heavy. Once when she stepped out for some work she was intercepted. She came back to relate the incident to her husband. The verse of *surah* Al-Ahzaab talking of a 'jilbab', or shawl over garments, was revealed at that time.

### ISLAM FROM MALE PERSPECTIVE

Most commentaries in the subcontinent on the subject are by men. It is almost always Islam from the perspective of men, women voices are seldom heard on the hijab. Abul Ala Mawdudi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, wrote an Urdu book *Purdah* in 1939. The book has since been translated into several languages and has seen many reprints. His is a conservative outlook on *purdah*. He talked of covering the face to avoid a lustful male gaze. This is remarkable since Mawdudi was among the first to respect Muslim women's right to go to mosques to offer prayers. To this day, Jamaat-e-Islami welcomes women in mosques under its management and has a woman's representative on its board. Among the women who come for prayers at the Jamaat's mosques, some are in a burqa, others in a hijab, some merely cover their head and bosom with a shawl or *dupatta*. All are permitted.

## ‘Purdah’ for men, too

TALK of hijab, and the mind’s eye of almost all men automatically shifts to women. In fact, any discussion on *hijab* is always from a male perspective. There is an ongoing debate over whether women must cover their face or it will suffice for them to merely wrap a loose sheet or shawl around the head and bosom. Of course, many believe a woman must have a complete layer of clothing over and above what she normally wears. Seldom, if ever, is a man’s attire discussed in the light of Islam.

In Islam, a man too is required to dress modestly. Pertinently, this ‘purdah’, or concealment, is not just for women but also men. Men, too, are asked not to dress in clothes that reveal the contours of their body, particularly the region around midriff and a little below: Under all circumstances a man is required to cover himself from waist downwards, including the knees. The region should preferably be covered in a loose garment. In other words, a man is advised to keep his body covered waist downwards in front of other men, too.

In hijab, the focus is often on the physical meaning of the term. According to the Quran, which mentions hijab in eight places, the *purdah* starts from the eyes. Men have been instructed to lower their gaze, that is, avoid gawking at women. In fact, the instruction to lower one’s eyes is given first to men and then to women. Verse 30 of Surah Noor says, “(O Prophet) Enjoin believing men to cast down their looks and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Surely Allah is well aware of what they do.” The next verse gives a similar instruction. Verse 30, which addresses men, lays to rest all arguments about women dressing in a certain way, and inviting the male gaze. The Quran puts the onus on men to lower their gaze. Under no circumstances is a man allowed to gawk at a woman’s body, whatever her attire. It also refutes the argument that men can force women to dress in a certain way. Men are given instructions for themselves. Likewise, women have been given instructions applicable to them. To each his or her own. There is an instance from the Prophet’s life on the subject. Once a beautiful woman approached the Prophet for some advice on Hajj when he was with his companion Al Fadl bin Abbas. Abbas could not take his gaze off the woman. The Prophet noticed it. He did not admonish the woman for not covering her face or dressing in a certain manner. He touched Abbas’ chin and turned his face away. While this was the Prophet’s way of making Abbas obey the instruction of verse 30, it also meant that the responsibility for self-control lay with men.

NISSAR AHMAD

**MUSLIMS** offering prayers outside a mosque in Srinagar. In Islam, men, too, are asked not to dress in clothes that reveal the contours of their body, particularly the region around midriff and a little below.

Islam not only prohibits ogling the opposite gender, it instructs people not to walk with pride. Through Surah Luqman, verse 18, people are told, “Do not (con-

This contrasts with the practice in the Jameat Ulama-i-Hind and the Tablighi Jamaat where mosques are considered a monopoly of men, and women, in a hijab or otherwise, are not welcome. In fact, the Tablighi Jamaat, which encourages men to undertake outstation trips for spiritual rejuvenation, does not approve of women inside mosques. Women who travel to these spiritual retreats are usually asked to stay at a house in the vicinity of the mosque, not in the mosque itself. Of course, women making such trips are expected to be covered from head to foot and be accompanied by a male family member and not be independent.

Dr Israr Ahmed, whose commentaries on the Quran are followed widely online and who parted ways with Mawdudi on the subject of political participation of Muslims, recalled: “I have seen hijab and burqa in India, in Hyderabad. I addressed a lecture in Mecca Masjid. There were 15,000 men and 5,000 women. Every one of them was in complete burqa. Unlike in Pakistan.” Ahmed believed, “Surah Al-Ahzab which was revealed in 5 Hijri (615 CE) talks of *purdah* outside the home, Surah Noor talks of *purdah* at home. The former talks of a woman’s character, and enjoins men not to enter home without permission, the latter made it a general order to all and not just the Prophet’s wives.”

Well-known scholar Farhat Hashmi, a rare woman preacher whose online lectures on the Quran have gained popularity in the past 20 years, feels the instruction of hijab for women is to cover themselves with a loose sheet over their usual garments.

temptuously) turn your face away from people, nor tread haughtily upon the earth. Allah does not love the arrogant and the vainglorious."

According to scholars, hijab is not just about the headscarf or mere physical covering of the body. The Quran regards the idea of piety over and above clothing. Surah Araf's verse says, "O Children (of Adam)! Verily we have sent down to you clothing, it covers shame and as an adornment. But the clothing (of) righteousness—that is best. That (is) from (the) Signs of Allah so that they may remember."

That is as far as the scriptures go. The reality is different. Men tend to think it is their responsibility to ask women to observe hijab when they themselves move around in less than desirable attire. Interestingly, like women, men too occasionally, tend to suffer from wrong interpretation of faith. Some maulanas and imams tick off young men clad in jeans and T-shirt and men in formal suit with their shirt tucked in who come for prayers. They are told to wear pyjama-kurta or a full-sleeved shirt with pants. That the kurta-pyjama is a speciality of the subcontinent and has nothing to do with faith does not register with many of the clerics. A bareheaded man is not appreciated in mosques. Often in the middle of a prayer, a worshipper may put on his cap in the erroneous belief that one is supposed to keep one's head covered.

Easily forgotten is the fact that even in Hajj or Umrah, a man is only expected to tie an unstitched cloth around his middle, and put a shawl over his left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder and head bare. If a man's bare head is acceptable in Mecca and Medina, it must be allowed in Chandigarh or Chennai. That is the bare physical truth of the hijab for men.

The sexist interpretation of the hijab, which puts the responsibility for concealment of body and lowering the gaze entirely on women, seeks to absolve men of their responsibility.

*Ziya Us Salam*

"Jilbab means a long sheet, a sheet a woman wears over her garments when she steps out."

In extreme contrast to the views of Mauwdudi, Ahmed and Farhat Hashmi, the contemporary Islamic scholar Amina Wadud created quite a stir by leading mixed gender prayers in the United States some 17 years ago. Amina Wadud said in an interview, "There is nothing said in the Quran about the hijab. There are some statements in the Quran about women's dress. I don't believe that the hijab is a requirement of the religion. But it is personally my preference for my public work. I don't wear it at home, I don't wear it in my neighbourhood... but when I am in public I do.... But because the hijab is so politicised in a negative way under the roof of Islamophobia, I am even more inclined to assert it." Incidentally, after 9/11, Amina Wadud, like many others, was subjected to additional screening because she wore a hijab at the time. She was advised against wearing it. She replied, "No, no, why would I not identify with the people being the most oppressed?"

Amina Wadud wore a *naqab*, or veil, early in her life as a Muslim. "Until we actually accept people in the full range of their clothes, we cannot know about the full spectrum of women Muslim and their dress," she said, adding, "they are all about women saying... that's my body, my choice."

## THE HIJAB'S ADVENT IN INDIA

As far as India is concerned, the hijab made a beginning in the form of a loose single garment of cotton, usually with a cap attached to it. Some came with a veil, many without it. Women used to put the cap on the head and wrap the garment around their body. During the Sultanate period, women from upper classes donned it when they stepped out. Mughal princesses were not known to favour the burqa, but they were uniformly covered and stepped out only in a palanquin. For instance, Maham Anga, foster mother of Akbar who built the Khairul Manazil Masjid in Delhi, and Azizun Nisa, also known as Begum Akbarabadi, who built a mosque under her name near the historic Jama Masjid in Old Delhi, have been depicted in paintings of the era with their head covered but not in a hijab or burqa. In fact, the paintings of Maham Anga in *Akbarnama* depict her with clear facial contours and white and yellow robes. Clearly, she did not wear a hijab or a burqa. Before them, Raziya Sultan, the only woman to sit on the throne of Delhi, rode elephants and fought wars, without a veil, in the 13th century. In the run-up to her ascension to the throne, she went to Quwwatul Islam Masjid in Delhi on a Friday, clad in all red, and sought the support of the ulemma gathered there. Her hands, face and feet were not covered.

*Purdah* came with Muslim kings. Sudha Sharma writes in *The Status of Muslim Women in Medieval India*: "Strict purdah originated with Amir Timur.... He made the proclamation, 'As they were now in the land of idolatory and amongst strange people, the women of the families should be strictly concealed from the view of the stranger.' Purdah, thus, became common among Muslim ladies." According to her, Muslim men were zealous in guarding women from public gaze, and considered it a dishonour if they were exposed unveiled.

Niccolao Manucci, the 17th century Venetian traveller to the Mughal empire, wrote in his *Storia Do Mogor*, "Mohammedans are very touchy in the matter of allowing their women to be seen." Almost all Muslim women, except those from the peasant class, observed *purdah*. Only at Meena Bazaar, a fancy market instituted in Delhi during the time of Akbar and continued by Jahangir and Shahjehan, were women seen without *purdah* as they did not have to be veiled in front of the king, who visited the market and also arranged marriages of boys and girls there. *Purdah* then was regarded as a symbol of honour. Today, the hijab is a mark of identity. □

# Victimising women

Muslim women have always been in the cross hairs of the Sangh Parivar, and issues such as the hijab ban and the 'Sulli Deals' controversy only highlight the right wing's discomfort with the Muslim women who express dissent or assert their identity. BY **DIVYA TRIVEDI**

MUSLIM WOMEN IN INDIA ARE NO MORE A homogenous monolith than Muslim men, and there are divisions among them along the lines of caste, class and region as there are variations among Hindu women. However, what is undeniably a common experience for all Indian Muslim women today is that they are being used as pawns on the political chessboard by the Sangh Parivar.

From the criminalisation of triple talaq by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in 2019 to the recent controversy around disallowing girls from wearing hijab in educational institutions in Karnataka, Muslim women have been the target of the Sangh Parivar's manoeuvres.

In speech after speech on the election campaign trail in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented himself as the saviour of Muslim women. He claimed that he and his party had been rescuing Muslim women from the clutches of Muslim patriarchy. In an election rally in western U.P., he said, "Our Muslim daughters used to face a lot of trouble while going for studies because of eve-teasing on streets. They now have a sense of security after criminals were taken to task by our government."

The irony of his speeches was not lost on anyone familiar with history, especially those in the Muslim community, which bore the brunt of right-wing attacks during the Gujarat pogrom in 2002, when Modi was the Chief Minister. Muslim women were specifically targeted by rioters; they were gang-raped and their houses looted and destroyed. In the Naroda Pitiya massacre in Ahmedabad, a pregnant woman named Kausarbanu Sheikh was burned to death. The survivors and eyewitnesses of the riots spent years in refugee camps fearing for their lives.

The reverberations of the riots were felt across India, where polarisation and ghettoisation sharpened along religious lines and members of the post-2002 generation, who are eligible to vote now, continue to suffer the indirect impact of the violence faced by the community even though they have no memory of the pogrom.

Post 2014, when the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power at the Centre, Muslim men have been both criminalised and terrorised by the state apparatus in the hands of the right-wing government as well as by non-state elements of the Sangh Parivar. When the lives of Muslim men were ruined, by extension, their families and the women in their families also suffered.

The Delhi riots of 2020 and numerous lynchings in

the name of cow protection happened under the current dispensation, while random acts of violence against Muslims continue to be the order of the day. The suppression of the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and mass arrests of students and activists, many of them Muslims, were the other instance of 'otherisation' of Muslims.

Following relentless attacks by the right wing, Muslims were pushed to the wall. Some of them decided to play it safe by erasing markers of religious identity and staying in the shadows, while the more vocal among them asserted their identity, making use of the constitutional right to freedom of expression and the freedom to practise and propagate religion. Young educated Muslim women, in particular, chose to wear the hijab or headscarf asserting their right to do so in the eyes of the right wing. Many expressed their frustration at the state of affairs and, in solidarity with the less fortunate, took to social media to air their opinions. Twitter became the ground for political activism, leading to a heated battle between dissenting Muslim women and right-wing trolls.

### 'SULLI DEALS' OUTRAGE

In July 2021, an open source app called 'Sulli Deals' on the GitHub web platform, intending to teach these young Muslim women a lesson, was shared on Twitter. It put up more than 80 Muslim women "for auction" using doctored photographs taken from the Internet without their permission. Many of the publicly available photographs shared on the app were of Muslim journalists, activists, lawyers and artists. Hana Mohsin Khan, a pilot, filed a first information report (FIR) with the police and said on Twitter: "I'm resolute and firm in getting these cowards to pay for what they have done. These repeat offences will not be taken sitting down. Do your worse. I will do mine. I am a non-political account targeted because of my religion and gender."

Fatima Zohra Khan, a Mumbai-based lawyer whose name appeared on the app, also filed a complaint with the Mumbai Police.

A reporter named Fatima Khan was also targeted and she shared screenshots of the app on Twitter. She said: "Didn't check Twitter last night. Woke up this morning to realise my name, along with those of many other Muslim women, was up on GitHub as a list of Sulli Deals. Thankfully by the time I came across it, it had been taken down. But just the screenshots sent shivers down my spine. How is this acceptable? What will be the punishment, if any, meted out to the people who made this list? Muslim men are lynched, Muslim women are harassed and sold online. When will this end?"

Sulli is a derogatory term used for Muslim women. Every day, a new woman's face would be put up on the app as "Sulli deal of the day". The app was clearly intended to humiliate and degrade Muslim women.

In an open letter condemning the political campaign of hate, women's rights activists and concerned citizens said: "This is a conspiracy to target women by creating a database of those Muslim women journalists, professionals and students who were actively raising a voice on social media against right-wing Hindutva majoritarianism. The intention is to silence their political participation.... We demand equal citizenship and political participation in offline and online spaces for Muslim women."

The Editors' Guild of India also deplored the act and said, "This vile attack is symptomatic of underlying misogyny in some sections of the society, especially against Muslim women as well as those who have been outspoken critics of the current government."

The Delhi Commission for Women issued a notice to the Delhi Police after which the Cyber Cell filed an FIR under Section 354-A of the Indian Penal Code.

Following several complaints, GitHub shut down the app, but the app reappeared six months later under the name of 'Bulli Bai'. This time, the names of more than 100 Muslim women figured in the app, including Pakistani Nobel laureate Malala Yousufzai, the actor Shabana Azmi, Congress leader Sadaf Jafar, Kashmiri journalist Quratulain Rehbar, the wife of a sitting judge of the Delhi

PTI

**SHWETA SINGH** and Mayank Rawat, the accused in the Bulli Bai app case, being produced before the Bandra Metropolitan Magistrate court, in Mumbai on January 10, 2022.

> Following right-wing attacks, many Muslims stayed in the shadows, while the more vocal among them, especially young educated women, chose to wear the hijab to assert their identity.

High Court and 65-year-old Fatima Nafees, mother of Najeeb Ahmed, a JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) student who has disappeared.

Delhi-based journalist Ismat Ara filed a complaint with the police on the basis of which the Cyber Cell filed an FIR under the charges of promoting enmity on the grounds of religion, threatening national integration and sexual harassment of women.

The Delhi High Court Women Lawyers Forum wrote to the Chief Justice of India seeking directions to strictly prohibit such online auctions of human beings as though they were inanimate objects. The forum said that the lack of action in the 'Sulli Deals' case emboldened the culprits to use with impunity pictures of freethinking women who are considered independent with dissenting voices.

Soon thereafter, the Mumbai Police arrested four persons: 18-year-old Shweta Singh and 21-year-old Mayank Rawat from Uttarakhand, an engineering student named Vishal Kumar Jha from Bengaluru and Neeraj Singh, an MBA graduate from Odisha. Meanwhile, the Delhi Police arrested 21-year-old Niraj Bishnoi from Jorhat in Assam and declared that he was the mastermind of the 'Bulli Bai' app. He is a second-year B.Tech student of Vellore Institute of Technology in Bhopal. Shweta Singh was reportedly handling three accounts in the 'Bulli Bai' app and Vishal Kumar Jha opened an account called Khalsa Supremacist, apparently to make it look like it was a Khalistani operation.

Later, the Intelligence Fusion and Strategic Operations (IFSO) of the Delhi Police arrested a man named Aumkareshwar Thakur in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, and declared that he was the mastermind behind the 'Sulli Deals' app.

The Delhi Police said that they were able to identify Aumkareshwar Thakur on the basis of inputs provided by Niraj Bishnoi. They also said that he had joined a group called 'Trad Mahasabha' using the Twitter handle 'gangescion' in January 2020. The group members would often discuss how to troll Muslim women and Aumkareshwar Thakur developed the code for the 'Sulli Deals' app. After the app hit the headlines, he deleted all his social media accounts, the police added.

A Delhi court denied bail to Aumkareshwar Thakur stating that misuse of technology and the impact of the alleged acts on the larger section of society cannot be seen as negligible crimes when compared with other offences that invite harsher punishment. Metropolitan Magistrate Vasundhara Chhaunkar observed: "The accused had consciously used Tor browser so that his identity could not be disclosed and various complaints have been received against the 'Sulli Deals' app, which are pending across India. The investigation is at a nascent stage where crucial evidence and the further chain of events are yet to be conclusively unearthed. Granting bail to the accused at this juncture will prejudice a fair investigation."

### RAMIFICATIONS OF HIJAB ISSUE

Even as the authorities were taking action in the online auction cases, controversy surrounding the hijab in Karnataka schools returned the Muslim woman to the centrestage of national politics.

The hijab issue became so heated in just a matter of days that its reverberations were felt even in the election campaigns in distant Uttar Pradesh. However, given the diversity of the community and its aspirations, the semantics of the issue differed. For instance, in the slums of Delhi, where a huge Bengali Muslim population lives, the term 'hijab' is a foreign word. Women who live in working-class neighbourhoods and who work as domestic labour, construction workers, and so on, sometimes cover their heads with a scarf but refer to it as 'isqab'.

Tabassum, a domestic worker, and her friends who live in such localities also call it the *chunni*, *dupatta*, *purdah* or *pallu* when wearing a saree. They cover their heads when they are out on the road but take it off while at work or at home, or while taking selfies outside, or when riding a bicycle, a prized mode of transport among the working-class women of Delhi. Besides, the unmarried girls in their circle do not cover their heads at all.

Speaking to *Frontline*, Tabassum said that girls who read the Quran and keep a *purdah* or *chunni* on their heads are considered "good girls" by the men and elders of the community. She said: "Sometimes, even women pass comments or taunt us if we go to the mall or to a movie." Tabassum has worn a headscarf, off and on, since she was 10 years old, and it has become a habit now. She said: "I have worn it for so long that if I were to stop wearing it, I would feel odd as if something was missing."

But she has never worn a burqa because she does not want to get "habituated" to it. She said: "If I start wearing a burqa, then how will I work? I will have to sit at home all the time. I do what the Quran says, I try to be a good person, what more? Besides, if I worry about the taunts, then how will I earn or feed my children?"

On the hijab controversy in Karnataka, she said that it was a good thing that the schools were asking girls to remove the hijab because "if people have their way, they will not think twice before putting girls behind cages. It is not such a bad idea what the schools are doing."

In the polarised debate that is raging between rights and rituals in India, there is little space for the articulation of a working-class Muslim woman like Tabassum. And that is the real tragedy. ☐

# Veiled threat to education

The hijab ban in government-run and minority-aided educational institutions seeks to undo whatever little progress has been made in getting Muslims educated. The reality of poor educational attainments among Muslims is the result of low economic status and not regressive or backward practices. BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

MURALI KUMAR K.

**IN A CLASSROOM** at Maharani college in Bengaluru on February 16. While Muslims may have much more restricted access to education, they have participated in equal measure in the process of reducing gender disparities in enrolment.

IN THE HEAT GENERATED OVER THE HIJAB, it is important to locate the controversy in the light of the larger restrictions on the education of Muslims, especially women. The ban on the hijab in higher educational institutions in Karnataka is on the grounds of maintaining sartorial uniformity in the education system. Yet as far as uniformity in accessing education is concerned, there is a wide variation among social and religious groups. Bridging that gap is what governments ought to be doing. The ban completely ignores the struggle of ordinary women from minority communities to acquire an education. It also ignores their aspirations of realising their dreams and goals in a space that under the Constitution is open to all without prejudice. As enrolment and attendance figures show, it is only a small, yet steadily growing, percentage of such women among Muslims who manage to reach the portals of higher education. It is not their religion that impedes their education but their economic status.

A majority of Muslims have been kept outside the stream of modern education, not wilfully or because they have wanted it that way but because these avenues have never been accessible to them fully. With education mostly in the private sector today, it is only the public-funded institutions with their low fee structures that draw in students from economically weaker sections across social and religious groups. Today, the ban on the hijab in government-run and minority-aided educational institutions and the attendant controversy seek to undo whatever little progress has been made in getting Muslim girls educated. What the debate on the issue does is to obfuscate the reality of poor educational attainments among Muslims.

In India, educational enrolment as captured by gross enrolment ratios (GERs)—the numbers enrolled as a proportion of the population in the relevant age group—still has a pyramidal structure. This ratio tends to drop as one moves from lower to higher levels of education. Thus, in 2019-20, the GER at the primary stage (classes 1 to 5) stood at 103.7 per cent, while that at the upper primary stage (classes 6 to 8) was 89.7 per cent. At the secondary stage (classes 9 to 10), the level was even lower, at 78.0 per cent, dropping to 51.4 per cent at the higher secondary stage (classes 11 to 12). At 27.1 per cent, the lowest GER was in higher education. In other words, there is a progressive narrowing of access to education as one moves to higher levels. This is of course not uniformly distributed across all social groups: while the gaps have been narrowing over time, the representation of Scheduled Caste (S.C.) and Scheduled Tribe (S.T.) communities at higher levels of education, for instance, continues to be lower than their share in the population. However, the gender gap has almost completely been eliminated at least as far as total enrolment is concerned; a steady rise in female enrolment at all levels of education has meant that even in higher education their representation, at 49.03 per cent of total enrolment in 2019-20, is proportionate to their share in the total population. Indeed, their estimated higher education GER at 27.3 per cent is greater than the 26.9 per cent estimated for males.

However, the greatest gap in access to education is between the Muslim minority and the rest of the population. As Table 1 shows, the representation of Muslims in total enrolment at each level of education progressively declines as one moves to higher levels of education. At the primary stage, their proportion in total enrolment reflects their share in the total population, but at the higher education stage, it is way below that share. In other words, the extent to which Muslims constitute a minority increases with increases in the level of education. Their situation stands out as exceptional in comparison with other smaller religious minorities and the historically disadvantaged sections such as the S.Cs and the S.Ts.

### SITUATION IN KARNATAKA

The figures for Karnataka, a State where the proportion of the Muslim population is almost the same as the national average, are also shown in Table 1. These figures and their comparison with the all-India picture bring out two important facts. Firstly, Karnataka also reflects the larger reality of access of Muslims in India to education but with a particularly marked drop in Muslim representation in enrolment in the transition from the secondary to the higher secondary level, which then carries over to higher education.

Implicit in the slightly higher representation of Muslim women in enrolment than Muslim men at all levels of education is another important aspect of the issue. Therefore, while Muslims may have much more restricted access to education, they have participated in equal measure in the process of reducing gender disparities in enrolment. This comes out even more sharply when we see the trends in the proportion of women in higher education enrolment in India in the past five years (Table 2). Here, Muslims have actually exceeded the national average, and by 2019-20, more Muslim women were enrolled in higher educational institutions than Muslim men. This disabuses one of any notion that the community in general keeps its women away from education; if the proportion of Muslim women in higher education is low, it is because Muslims in general have limited access to this education.

There is, however, a fair degree of State-to-State disparity in this regard. In Kerala, for instance, Muslim women heavily outnumber Muslim men in higher educa-

Table 1: **Proportion of Muslims in total enrolment by level of education (%)**

| Level | Male | Female | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| **All India** | | | |
| Primary (1 to 5) | 15.13 | 15.66 | 15.38 |
| Upper primary (6 to 8) | 13.23 | 14.54 | 13.87 |
| Secondary (9 to 10) | 11.33 | 13.29 | 12.27 |
| Higher secondary (11 to 12) | 9.15 | 10.67 | 9.89 |
| Higher education (UG and above) | 5.33 | 5.58 | 5.45 |
| **Karnataka** | | | |
| Primary (1 to 5) | 16.1 | 16.39 | 16.24 |
| Upper primary (6 to 8) | 15.28 | 15.81 | 15.54 |
| Secondary (9 to 10) | 14.25 | 15.47 | 14.83 |
| Higher secondary (11 to 12) | 6.94 | 8.08 | 7.54 |
| Higher education (UG and above) | 6.91 | 6.31 | 6.61 |

Source: UDISE+ 2019-20 and AISHE 2019-20

SHAILENDRA BHOJAK/PTI

**STUDENTS LEAVE A PRE-UNIVERSITY COLLEGE** after they were not allowed to enter it wearing the hijab, in Udupi, Karnataka, on February 16.

tion enrolment. In several States where a hostile political atmosphere prevails against Muslims, the proportion of Muslim women's enrolment tends to be lower. Karnataka also seems to reflect this picture, which is the opposite of the national average. As the figures in Table 2 show, Muslim women in the State have fallen slightly behind non-Muslim women in bridging the gender gap.

The literacy rates in the National Sample Survey's (NSS) 585th Report, 75th Round on Household Social Consumption on Education in India (July 2017-June 2018), for religious groups showed that though Muslim women have the lowest rates of literacy among religious groups, the gap between Hindu women and Muslim women was less than 2 per cent. Literacy rates of women (seven years and above) among religious groups were as follows: Hindus 70 per cent, Muslims 68.8 per cent, Christians 82.2 per cent and Sikhs 75.9 per cent. The gross attendance ratio (the ratio of the number of persons attending in the level of education to the number of persons in the corresponding age group) for women in higher secondary and above was 12.1 per cent for Muslims, 22 per cent for Hindus, 27.7 per cent for Sikhs and 32.2 per cent for Christians. The age-specific attendance ratio (percentage of persons in that age group currently attending educational institutions) for different religious groups showed that 16.9 per cent of Muslim women, 25.5 per cent of Hindu women, 35 per cent of Sikh women and 37.8 per cent of Christian women in the age group 18-23 were found to be currently attending educational institutions. The percentage of Muslim women (3-35 years age group) who had never enrolled in education was 21.9 per cent compared with 15.9 per cent for Hindus, 7.2 per cent for Sikhs and 11.2 per cent for Christians. Although 38 per cent of Muslim women, 41.6 per cent of Hindu women, 42.1 per cent of Sikh women and 46.9 per cent of Christian women were currently attending some form of educational institution, the gains and strides made by women, particularly those from the minority communities, have to be increased.

## CONCEALING BIGOTRY

The hijab issue and a variety of issues connected with it have generated much debate. The only purpose behind bringing up many of them in the context of the hijab issue is to conceal the politics of bigotry, prejudice and polarisation that lies behind the controversy and create the conditions for that politics to have a field day.

Women's organisations such as the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), the All India Progressive Women's Association, the Bebaak Collective, the National Federation of Indian Women and Awaaz-e-Niswaan and people's movement organisations such as the National Alliance of People's Movements have called out the "intimidation by Hindu supremacist thugs" of Muslim girl students. They are critical of patriarchy, misogynist dress codes of all kinds and supportive of the right of women to wear what they want. In a statement, they said: "What women choose to wear, whether they choose to cover or uncover is a matter of choice. It cannot be a measure of modesty or immodesty." The controversy over the hijab, they say, is the latest pretext to impose a kind of apartheid on Muslim women.

Table 2: **Share of women in higher education enrolment (%)**

| | All India | | Karnataka | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year | Total enrolment | Muslim enrolment | Total enrolment | Muslim enrolment |
| 2015-16 | 46.23 | 46.83 | 48.42 | 47.32 |
| 2016-17 | 46.84 | 47.31 | 49.02 | 47.18 |
| 2017-18 | 47.59 | 48.87 | 50.03 | 48.29 |
| 2018-19 | 48.64 | 49.29 | 50.04 | 47.71 |
| 2019-20 | 49.03 | 50.19 | 50.23 | 47.96 |

Source: AISHE 2019-20

Mariam Dhawale, general secretary, AIDWA, said: "It is a direct attack on the right of education of young Muslim girl students. It is a denial of a right guaranteed to them under the Constitution of India. It is a denial of opportunities and the right to live a life with dignity. With the 12th standard exams just two months away, this situation has jeopardised the future of hundreds of young Muslim girl students. It is not the clothes worn by the girls that disturb equality, integrity and public law and order but the communal mobilisation by the Bajrang Dal and the Sangh Parivar. As it is, lakhs of children have dropped out of the school system during the pandemic. Schools and colleges have just about opened up. At such a time, such divisions among the student community will only push girls back into the confines of their homes, ruining the lives of many young persons. The developments in Karnataka are not about religion at all. A secular, democratic India has to rise in unison against sinister attempts by communal and fundamentalist forces to undermine our Constitution."

Hasina Khan of the Bebaak Collective said that the protesting girl students could not be denied a right to education on the basis of their religious identity and expression. She said that the decision about a hijab or a burqa must come from Muslim women themselves who have had to negotiate a complex world between a majoritarian Hindu state and their own vilified community and public spaces. The struggle for the right to wear a hijab existed along with the struggle of many women to not wear a hijab or a burqa, she said, and the women's movement had engaged with all these questions. The assertive act of wearing a hijab had become a symbol of maintaining the right to a minority religious identity in the larger context of the highly Islamophobic political climate instigated by right-wing groups, she said. Hasina Khan said: "When women struggle against the wearing of a burqa due to their own internal critique of the community and religious practices, it has an entirely different significance."

Most Muslim scholars and activists, therefore, believe that the wearing of the hijab and its ban were deliberately made into a controversy. Talking to *Frontline*, Zeenat Shaukat Ali, founder and director general of the WISDOM Foundation and a former professor of Islamic studies at St Xavier's College, Mumbai, said that there were many dimensions to the whole controversy and a huge ideological spectrum ranging from culture, role of religion, identity, national identity, gender justice to making a political statement. The issue, she said, had been blown out of proportion for political reasons, with young impressionable minds getting caught in the crossfire.

Zeenat Shaukat Ali said: "When politics enters, things get magnified. There has been love jehad, lynching, hate speeches and no punishment for that and open saffronisation. Religious symbolism has also been introduced at various levels, including in Parliament; no one questions that. Muslims consider themselves marginalised, not only in India but in other parts of the world too. The hijab issue is a side issue." She said that if symbols of male religious identity such as the turban, skullcap, Hindu tilak or the crucifix are allowed, then there should not be any problem with women expressing their own identities. Yet she said that her own work on Islam and the Quran informed her that Islam never introduced the veil or even polygamy. Not many people she said knew that polygamy was a restrictive practice, not a permissive one.

According to her, the veil predated Islam and was a practice in the entire region 2,500 years before the Prophet Mohammad. Many icons and statuettes of that period reflected that. Elite women in ancient Mesopotamia and in the Byzantine, Greek and Persian empires wore the veil as a sign of high status. The word hijab itself was used eight times in the Quran and not once used in connection with clothing. It was used metaphorically, and translated in the Arabic lexicon it meant a barrier or separation, none of which concerned clothing. It was more to mark privacy at a time when doors, and so on, did not exist. "To equate it with a headscarf is specious. The dress prescribed for both men and women was one which basically suggested covering one's private parts. Even the face covering was not prescribed by Islam. One could wear any dress that was decent. The *abaya* [a cloak or a robe] itself is not deemed necessary by the most conservative sections of the clergy. But it has to be made clear that the Constitution of India gives every woman the right to wear as she chooses. If one wants to remain a traditionalist, one is free to do so," she said. ☐

# The paradox of hijab

The hijab controversy, while exposing a sinister right-wing agenda to communalise the situation for political gain, has given rise to scrutiny from within the Muslim community and revived the debate on issues such as patriarchy, feminine seclusion, and Quranic misinterpretation.

BY **A. FAIZUR RAHMAN**

YOUTUBE SCREENGRAB

**A HIJAB-WEARING GIRL** named Muskan Khan who was heckled by a group of boys in a college in Mandya, Karnataka, on February 8, 2022.

IN EARLY FEBRUARY, THE SHOCKING SIGHT of a lone Muslim girl being heckled and chased inside an educational institution by a large group of Hindu boys chanting 'Jai Shri Ram' stunned India and reverberated across the globe. One could well imagine the demoralising effect it must have had on the Muslim psyche. The uncivilised attempt to stop a Muslim girl from entering her college was part of a students' agitation in Mandya, a city in Karnataka. The Hindu students were questioning the right of Muslim students to wear the hijab (headscarf) inside classrooms.

For several years now, Indian Muslims have been at the receiving end of frightening harassment that has affected them psychologically and curtailed their freedom in almost every conceivable sphere of democratic activity. This social exclusion has, to a large extent, been effected through extreme violence including brutal mob lynchings in the name of cow protection and demonisation campaigns that accuse Muslims of resorting to innovative forms of jehad against Hindus to either lure them into marriage, infect them with disease, outpopulate them, gobble up their lands, or infiltrate the country's civil service at their expense. The vilification of Muslim women too forms a significant aspect of this community-baiting. Malignant tech tools such as the 'Sulli Deals' and 'Bulli Bai' apps have been used with gay abandon to "sell" and humiliate them on the Internet.

In December 2021, weeks before the hijab imbroglio erupted, the Islamophobic offensive appeared to peak when genocidal calls for the massacre of Indian Muslims were issued by saffron-clad Hindutva leaders during a three-day 'Dharam Sansad' (religious parliament) held in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. The conference was a blatant attempt to deceive Hindus into believing that India was on the verge of being taken over by Muslims, and that nothing short of their complete elimination would save the situation. The most horrifying incitement in pursuance of this objective came from Sadhvi Annapurna, a bellicose female ideologue of the Hindu Mahasabha who urged her community to kill no less than 20 lakh Muslims. She claimed that India was steadily moving towards becoming an Islamic state, and for it to be converted back into a 'Sanatan Vedic Hindu Rashtra', Hindu youth must throw their books away and start wielding weapons.

### THE FACTS OF THE CASE

It would be difficult, therefore, not to see and assess the hijab controversy in this context. The issue came to light on December 31, 2021, when a group of Muslim girls belonging to the Government Pre-University College in Udupi protested against being sent out of their classes for wearing the hijab. According to the facts of the case presented in a writ petition dated January 29, 2022, before the Karnataka High Court on behalf of six aggrieved girls, the discrimination against hijab-wearing students had started in September 2021. Since then, they were regularly made to stand outside the classroom and marked absent. The petition also alleged that on January 14, 2022, three of the petitioners were manhandled inside the college and threats were issued "to spoil their education completely", forcing the students to approach the court.

The issue soon took a communal turn. Hindu students in different Karnataka colleges started counter-protests by wearing saffron clothing and preventing hijab-wearing girls from entering colleges. The most frightful of these incidents was clearly the one mentioned above, on the back of which the Muslim girls' case gained international attention. If an investigative report by *The News Minute* (TNM), a news portal, is to be believed, it was not a simple case of a group of students protesting against another group's violation of college rules. It was a communal issue from the beginning. The report blamed the Udupi-based Hindu Jagarana Vedike for instigating Hindu students into protesting against their hijab-wearing classmates, and providing them with saffron shawls and turbans. The report also claimed that Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Yashpal Suvarna was seen standing amidst the students who were chanting slogans at a faceoff that took place in MGM Pre University College, also in Udupi.

**HIJAB-WEARING** students talking to a faculty member after they were not allowed to enter the school, in Kundapura in Udupi district of Karnataka, on February 5, 2022.

Given the fact the hijab was not a contentious issue before September 2021, but was created and subsequently communalised as alleged in *The News Minute* report, the best course of action would have been a friendly discussion between the leaders of Hindu and Muslim communities to sort the matter out at the local level. But perhaps such a negotiated settlement was not attempted, or had failed, because both parties, or one of them, wanted to exploit the matter for political gain.

Nonetheless, the case is now in the court and, interestingly, the liberty to wear the hijab has been claimed mainly as a "cultural and religious right" and not on the basis of an unconstrained autonomy of an individual's rational choice. In his arguments before a three-judge bench of the Karnataka High Court, the senior advocate Sanjay Hegde, one of the counsels for the petitioners, did his best to incorporate the idea of a person's decisional autonomy by focusing on the 'freedom of conscience' that Article 25 of the Constitution grants to all persons equally. He cited the landmark case of *Bijoe Emmanuel & Others vs State of Kerala* (1986 SCC (3) 615), in which the Supreme Court ruled that even if a religious belief or practice does not appeal to anyone's reason or sentiment it would attract the protection of Article 25 if it is "genuinely and conscientiously held as part of the profession or practice of religion".

Sanjay Hegde's point was that the right to wear the hijab in government educational institutions could be granted on the basis of an individual's conscientious belief without subjecting it to the essentiality test where belief is primarily ascertained with reference to the community-endorsed doctrines of the religion, as laid down by the Supreme Court in the Shirur Mutt case (1954) and in *Srimad Perarulala Ethiraja Ramanuja Jeeyar Swami*

PTI

*vs The State of Tamil Nadu* (1972). In principle, Sanjay Hegde is right for religious communities are almost always controlled by patriarchs who decide what constitutes an essential religious practice and impose it on all followers without giving them the freedom to dissent. In fact, dissent is often construed as apostasy or blasphemy and punished. Hence, the need for judicial intervention in a secular democracy to protect individual rights within a community. Otherwise, the freedom of conscience available to reformists within a religious group to challenge outdated doctrines and authoritarian edicts will be seriously compromised. Political philosopher Will Kymlicka calls this, citing John Rawls, the idea of "rational revisability" that gives believers the right to rationally evaluate and revise existing conceptions of faith.

Justice D.Y. Chandrachud addressed this question in a different way in the Sabarimala case. Agreeing with the "anti-exclusion principle" which limits the autonomy of religious groups "in situations where these groups are blocking access to basic goods", the judge held that "where a religious practice causes the exclusion of individuals in a manner which impairs their dignity, the freedom of religion must give way to the overarching values of a liberal Constitution".

However, it may still be argued that if the right to dissent from within a religious group is entitled to judicial protection under Articles 19 and 25, the right to follow one's faith would also qualify for the same protection when it is sought to be curtailed from outside by another religious group or the state. For this reason, the freedom to wear the hijab in public or in government educational institutions cannot be denied as it does not affect any legitimate state interest or security, public order, health, or morality.

## SCRUTINY FROM WITHIN

That may settle the issue insofar as hijab's legality is concerned. But no religious belief or practice can escape philosophical and ethical scrutiny from within. The Bijoe Emmanuel case cited by Sanjay Hegde hardly involved any deontological inquiry as it was an act of omission by which students belonging to a Christian sect refused to sing the national anthem, believing (conscientiously, of course) that singing it was against the tenets of their religious faith. Significantly, the students' belief (even if it was held under duress) did not perpetuate any questionable custom. The only consequence of that belief was their expulsion from school, which was undone by the favourable court decision.

On the other hand, in the case of hijab, Muslim students will be indulging in an act of commission when they wear it, thus attracting moral consequences. This would mean that even if the court upholds the Muslim students' right to cover their heads, agreeing in good faith with their claim to decisional autonomy or conscientious belief as they case may be, it can still asked if their volition is free from the constraints of another's choice. In his 1958 essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*, political theorist Isaiah Berlin had called such a *freedom* from external constraints *negative liberty*, while terming as *positive liberty* the *freedom* to pursue one's choices with full autonomy.

In other words, if the court upholds the Muslim students' *positive liberty* to wear the hijab, their *negative liberty* can still be questioned because coercion does not always take the form of physical threats or intimidation. An individual's free will can be subverted through propaganda, indoctrination or advertisement.

## HIJAB FOR NON-RELIGIOUS REASONS

Insofar as the hijab and the burqa are concerned, Muslims have also worn them for non-religious reasons—for instance, to resist the objectification of the female body by the cosmetic industry through its consumer culture.

In his essay *Algeria Unveiled* Frantz Fanon powerfully narrates how the burqa was used by the Algerian women during French occupation as an expression of anti-colonialism to resist the colonisers' attempt to assimilate Algeria by unveiling its women and sexualising the city by treating them as merchandise.

Thankfully, such a situation does not exist in India today, nor is it the case of the Muslim students. They have clearly indicated to the court that hijab is their cultural and religious right. In fact, Muskan Khan, the girl who was harassed by Hindu students in Mandya, has been wearing the hijab from the age of 7. This is not surprising because there are several "Islamic" CBSE [Central Board of Secondary Education] schools in India where hijab is part of the uniform from classes 1-12 without which students are not allowed to enter the classrooms. Many conservative Muslim families too make their female members wear the hijab from a very young age.

These facts suggest that the conditioning of Muslim girls to adopt an "Islamic" attire does happen in India. Hence the speculation about the free will of the Muslim students who want to wear the hijab both inside and outside their classrooms. Given these facts, a look at the theology of hijab becomes imperative to know if the hijab and the burqa are indeed symbols of Muslim patriarchy.

### THE THEOLOGY OF HIJAB

Interestingly, the Quran does not specify any attire for men or women except modest clothing and an instruction to "lower their gaze" (24:30-31), which would make sense only when women are not shrouded in a burqa. However, the Quran mentions *jilbaab*, an outer garment to be worn around the body (33:59), and *khimaar*, a covering for the bosom (24:31). The word hijab occurs eight times in the Quran (7:46, 17:45, 19:17, 33:53, 38:32, 41:5, 42:51 and 83:15) but not once in the meaning of headscarf as understood by Muslims today. It refers to an imaginary or real barrier between people or things. For instance, verse 17:45 talks of a hidden barrier (*hijaaban mastoora*) between the non-believers and Prophet Mohammed, and verse 33:53 teaches social etiquette to the not-so-literate Arab guests of the Prophet by instructing them not to confront the women of his household directly for their requirements but to talk to them from behind a curtain (*min waraayi hijaab*) as a mark of respect.

HIJAB IS OUR RIGHT
HIJAB IS OUR PRIDE
HIJAB is our right

REUTERS

**AT A PROTEST** near Mumbai against the hijab ban in schools in Karnataka, on February 13, 2022.

Why then this insistence on the full veil or the hijab in Muslim societies? It is mostly due to intentional mistranslation and misinterpretation of the Quran and hadiths by Muslim patriarchs. For example, *The Noble Quran*, an English translation authorised by Saudi Arabia, inserts an extra-Quranic meaning to the following text in 24:31 concerning the dress code: *walaa yubdeena zeenatahunna illa ma zahara minha wal yazribna bi khumurihinna ala juyoobihinna*. *The Noble Quran* translates it as: "[Tell the believing women]….not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent [like both eyes for necessity to see the way, or outer palms of hands or one eye or dress like veil, gloves, head cover, apron], and to draw their veils all over *juyoobihinna* [i.e., their bodies, faces, necks and bosoms]." The meaning of the phrase *khumurihinna ala juyoobihinna* that is sought to be conveyed in the parentheses is not what the Arabic text means. The correct meaning is "to put a covering over the bosoms". The face finds no mention in text. The translators of *The Noble Quran* have also cleverly tried to support their views by mistranslating a hadith from the Bukhari, which quotes Hazrath Aisha as saying that when verse 24:31 was revealed, women tore off pieces from their waist sheets (*murooth*) to use them as a covering for their "heads and faces". Once again, the words "heads and faces" are not found in the original hadith text, *shaqqaqna muroothahunna faqtamarna biha*, which means "they tore off the *murooths* to cover themselves up".

In this manner, Islamic scriptures have been hermeneutically distorted to seclude Muslim women. In the Indian subcontinent, the most influential votary of feminine seclusion was Abul Ala Maududi, founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami. His book *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam* has been so widely quoted by Muslim theologians in India that it is now a byword for Muslim patriarchy. The book warns that Muslim women must not just cover their heads but their faces too, because the "face is the most impressive thing in the human body. It is the index of the natural human charms, the most attractive part and the one possessing great sex appeal for others."

In Maududi's understanding of Islam, a Muslim woman cannot "wear glamorous clothes that attract attention, nor should she cherish the desire to display the charms of the face and the hand, nor should she walk in a manner as may invite the attention of others." He goes on to misinterpret Islam, saying: "It [Islam] says that the real place for the woman is the house and she has been exempted from the outdoor duties so that she may lead a dignified and peaceful life at home and carry out her domestic responsibilities efficiently."

And if any Muslim dissents from this view, it is because of "modern democracy [which] looks upon man as wholly independent and unaccountable and makes him his own legislator, and so renders all legislative business dependent on majority opinion." The culprit, of course, is the "concept of liberty [that] gave birth to the democratic system of government".

Maududi wrote *Purdah* around 1939, which means that for more than eight decades, his shocking misinterpretations of Islam—especially those suggesting that uncovered Muslim women are sinners who could pose a threat to the moral integrity of the society—have been percolating into Muslim minds in the Indian subcontinent. The result of this is there for all to see, and now, has engendered a paradox where freedom of conscience is being used by liberated women to impose on themselves a symbol of patriarchy, in the process essentialising it in the name of a religion that does not mandate it. □

*A. Faizur Rahman is Secretary-General of the Islamic Forum for the Promotion of Moderate Thought. He can be reached at themoderates2020@gmail.com and on Twitter at @FaizEngineer.*

# Coming to a head in France

France, the first country in Europe to ban the wearing of full veils in public a decade ago, has since seen a deepening of Islamophobia, with the Senate approving a law to ban headscarves in sports, and with Muslim-bashing emerging as a top political agenda in the upcoming presidential election. BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

THE HIJAB CONTROVERSY GENERATED BY the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its right-wing political affiliates is similar to the position taken by right-wing political parties in many European countries. For many years now, the right wing in Europe has expended most of its energy on demonising Islam and the Muslim world. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq triggered an influx of refugees into Europe. Muslims, who had been living in the continent for generations, began to demand their rights and a more meaningful role in politics. There was a backlash, leading to the rise of unabashed racism.

A recent opinion poll conducted in Switzerland showed that the majority of its population is against Muslim women wearing the hijab. Hate crimes against Muslims have substantially increased in Germany, Austria and France. A report titled "European Islamophobia Report 2020", released in December 2021, said that hate crimes against Muslims reached a "tipping point" during the pandemic. Senior political luminaries do not think twice before publicly lampooning Islam and Muslims. In 2018, Boris Johnson (then Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom) wrote in his column in *The Daily Telegraph* that veiled Muslim women reminded him of "bank robbers" and "letter boxes". There was a torrent of criticism about his tasteless observations but it did not hurt his political prospects at all.

France was the first country in Europe to ban the wearing of full veils in public places in 2012. The centre-right government of Nicolas Sarkozy, which took the decision, said that the move was necessary to preserve French culture and discourage "separatism". The law did not mention Islam or women in particular, but stated that the covering of the face in any public place was banned as a "public security measure". In 2011, the Sarkozy government banned the wearing of the hijab and even turbans in school classrooms. Only one member voted against the law in the national parliament. While this move found favour with the French public, it did not help Sarkozy win re-election. However, the national mood since then has become more extreme on the question of hijab and related issues.

Front runners from the far right and the centre right in this year's presidential elections in France have made Muslim-bashing their top political agenda, with the "hijab" issue occupying centre stage. All important issues, including bread and butter ones, have been confined to the back burner. The French economy has shrunk by 8.3 per cent in the last year. The poverty rate has more than doubled. The government had mishandled the pandemic outbreak, with COVID casualties in France being among the highest in Europe.

Facing mass discontent and social upheaval, President Emmanuel Macron has veered to the right in the last two years, focussing more on the alleged threat posed to the secular character of the French republic by citizens professing the Islamic faith than on more important economic and political issues. His popularity rating has gone up since then. An "anti-separatism" law was passed in the French parliament in July 2021. The government said that it was intended to strengthen France's secular system, while critics of the law say that it further marginalises Muslim citizens and restricts religious freedoms.

### INTIMIDATION CAMPAIGN

Since then, the government has launched an intimidation campaign targeting the Muslim community. Even civil society organisations helping the immigrant population have been targeted. Among the organisations dissolved by the Macron government was the "Collective against Islamophobia in France", which worked to defend victims of Islamophobia within the legal and constitutional framework of French law.

Enes Bayrakli, who co-authored the European Islamophobia Report 2020 (which had Macron on its cover), said that Macron "had become the face of institutional and structural Islamophobia in Europe. His policies are directly targeting, discriminating and criminalising Muslims in France." Bayrakli said that there were other politicians in Europe who were openly Islamophobic but France was "applying Islamophobic practices at the state level in dealing with its Muslim minorities".

France closed down more than 17 mosques in the last two years for violating vaguely defined "security laws" or not having proper "safety standards". The French Council on Islam was forced to adopt a "charter of principles" that commits Muslim religious officials to respect the rules decreed by the French government. The Macron government, after accusing Muslims of harbouring separatist tendencies, now wants them to give a pledge of loyalty to the French state. The "Charter of Principles" states: "From a religious and ethical point of view, Muslims, whether national or foreign residents, are bound to France by a pact. This compels them to respect national cohesion, public order and the laws of the Republic". This means that the duty to the state far outweighs their religious beliefs.

The charter further states: "No religious conviction can be evoked to evade the obligations of the citizen." Under the guise of protecting the Republic, President Macron has been accused of seeking to overturn the landmark 1905 French law which guaranteed secularism and the freedom of expression along with the separation of church and state.

## BANNING HIJAB IN SPORTS

The French Senate recently approved a law which aims to forbid the wearing of headscarves by women footballers. The amendment, approved by the majority of the members, said: "If the wearing of the veil is not explicitly forbidden, we could see the rise of community sports clubs promoting certain religious signs."

The French Soccer Federation has already banned players from wearing the headscarf during games. The lower house of parliament has not yet okayed the Bill passed by the Senate. The government does not want the Bill to be passed at this juncture as France is hosting the Olympics in three years. Female soccer players from many Muslim countries wear the headscarf on the playing field. Last year, the French Senate approved an amendment which sought to bar girls under 18 from wearing the hijab in public places. This amendment is not yet law as the French National Assembly as yet to approve it.

There was an immediate backlash in the social media against the move by the Senate. There were angry tweets such as: "Age to consent to sex in France:15. Age to consent to Hijab:18. It isn't a law against hijab. It is a law against Islam" and "I thought we already had this covered. Forcing a woman to wear hijab is wrong. Just like forcing her to take it off is wrong". The French Olympic athlete Ibtihaj Muhammad shared a post that read "Islamophobia is deepening in France". This is what happens, the post said, "when you normalise anti-Islamic hate speech, bias, discrimination and hate crimes—Islamophobia written into law".

Around 10 per cent of France's population, hailing mainly from the former French colonies in North and sub-Saharan Africa, adhere to the Islamic faith. Today, almost the entire French political establishment prefers to view the immigrant population as a looming threat to the concepts on which their state is based. President Macron and his senior Ministers have claimed that "Islamo-Leftism" threatens to corrupt and split French society. The term was first used by the candidate of the far right, Marie Le Pen, in her first presidential campaign in 2012.

## 'ISLAMO-LEFTISM'

Macron and his Ministers have blamed universities for spreading the so-called ideology of "Islamo-Leftism" in the country. Macron said: "The academic has its share

SPORT
POUR TOUTES

PASCAL ROSSIGNOL/REUTERS

**SUPPORTERS** of the women soccer team "Les Hijabeuses" with placards that read "Sports for all" and "Liberty, Egality, Fraternity for all" in Lille, France, on February 16. This demonstration was part of a protest against the French Senate's approval of a law that seeks to ban the hijab in competitive sports.

of blame. It has encouraged the ethnicisation of the social question, thinking this was a good line of research. But the result can only be secessionism. This means splitting the Republic in two.” The Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, warned that “Islamo-Leftism is wreaking havoc on society” and denounced what he termed as its adherents’ “intellectual complicity in terrorism”. The Minister for Higher Education and Research, Frederique Vidal, has said that the government will be ordering an investigation into the spread of “Islamo-Leftism” in academia.

Many French historians and researchers are questioning the officially sanctioned history of decolonisation. They want French students and the public to know about institutional racism and the atrocities committed during French colonial rule in Algeria, Haiti and other parts of the world. Because of their endeavours, Leftist and progressive intellectuals have been viciously targeted in the mainstream French media and by right-wing politicians. The aim is to tar the left-wing parties with the Islamist brush.

Jean-Luc Melenchon, the leader of the left-wing “France Unbowed” party, was the only prominent politician to criticise the stigmatisation of Muslims in France and participate in a march against Islamophobia in 2019. Melenchon is also running for the presidency. Many French commentators and intellectuals are accusing the Macron government of preparing the groundwork for a “McCarthyistic” witch-hunt in France, aimed at cleansing leading French institutions of suspected left-wing activists and sympathisers.

French politicians running for the country’s top office have now started talking of the “great displacement”, another racist conspiracy theory, originally promoted more than a decade ago by a French author, Rene Camus, a white supremacist. According to the theory, the white majority in North America and Europe will soon be replaced by immigrants, the majority of whom are Muslims. A version of this theory is popular among Hindutva circles as well.

iberté, Égalité, Fraternité
ur TouTes

### THE GREAT DISPLACEMENT THEORY

The “great displacement” theory was first embraced by lone wolf terrorists but now the major right-wing parties in France, the United States, Canada and Europe have also been propagating this outrageous theory. Many of Donald Trump’s supporters are also true believers. Mass killings of Muslims in New Zealand and the U.S. were carried out by adherents of this theory.

Valerie Pecresse, the candidate of the mainstream centre-right Republican party and another likely challenger to Macron in the run-off, has also started propagating the theory. She was a senior Minister in the Sarkozy government. In a speech in Paris in the third week of February, she told her supporters to “rise up” in order to prevent the “great replacement” from taking place in France. Pecresse frequently refers to Muslim-dominated areas in the country as “zones of non-France”.

Eric Zemmour, who until recently was the front runner among the host of right wing and centrist candidates vying for the presidency, is the biggest Muslim-baiter of them all. A French citizen of Algerian-Jewish descent and an author of books which have been bestsellers in France, he is a popular alt-right television pundit on Canal TV, the French version of the U.S.’ Fox Television network. He has been sanctioned twice by the French media watchdog for repeatedly fanning racial hatred. He has said that employers have the right to deny jobs to Muslims and Blacks. Many French Muslims have started voting with their feet and leaving the country for more hospitable climes.

In countries such as Turkey, the hijab controversy, which once figured prominently in politics, has now become a non-issue. The founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, had banned headscarves for women and the fez cap for men in public places and decreed the wearing of western garb in offices. It was only after the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2002 that things started to change. During his second term in office, the military, which at the time considered itself as the guardian of Ataturk’s legacy, threatened to stage another coup. One of their major complaints was that the wives of the Turkish President and the Prime Minister insisted on wearing their headscarves during official ceremonies. Two decades later, with the AKP having consolidated its hold on the country, the hijab issue has ceased to be a polarising one.

ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

UTTAR PRADESH

# Down to the wire

The OBC-MBC consolidation created by the BJP has broken down following the desertion by strong regional leaders. The smaller allies of the S.P. are expected to bring crucial contributions to the opposition alliance in the last four phases that could prove decisive.

BY **VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN** AND **DIVYA TRIVEDI**

BARELY five days before the third phase of polling in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, scheduled to be held on February 20, 2022, several media outlets in the State, including a few prominent dailies, television channels and news portals, carried a report that became a point of widespread political debate. The report had it that Mohan Bhagwat, the Sarsanghchalak of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), held a virtual conference with top level activists of the Sangh Parivar in Uttar Pradesh after the second phase of polling on February 14, exhorting them to intensify efforts to ensure the victory of candidates of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

The reports said Bhagwat, while making the appeal, referred to inputs from the Intelligence Bureau (I.B.) on the first two phases of polling (held on February 10 and 14) pointing to poor performance by the BJP and its allies. The reports quoted unnamed activists who participated in the virtual conference to state that Bhagwat cited a figure as low as 17 for the BJP in the 58 seats that went to polls in the first phase. The activists apparently quoted Bhagwat as having said: “The BJP is likely to win just 17 seats in the first phase, and in the second phase too the party has done equally bad.”

The leadership of the RSS and the BJP did not come up with a formal response to these reports. However, several senior Sangh Parivar activists based in Lucknow told *Frontline* that the reports were the “toolkit productions” of opposition parties such as the Samajwadi Party (S.P.) and the Congress and were aimed at confusing BJP cadre and voters. One of them asserted that Bhagwat had not referred to any I.B. inputs in any of his interactions with top-level activists of the Sangh Parivar. Another leader said: “It is beneath the dignity of the RSS to respond to such baseless and malicious reports.”

Yet, several Sangh Parivar activists, particularly of

**SAMAJWADI PARTY** president Akhilesh Yadav at an election rally in Kanpur on February 18.

the BJP, admit that the dominance which the party had displayed in western Uttar Pradesh in elections held in 2014, 2017 and 2019 has indeed been shaken and that polling in the first two phases has given broad indications of this trend. Central to this perception is the realisation that significant sections of the Jat community, which has a big say in the 58 seats of the first phase, have parted ways with the BJP and aligned themselves with the S.P.-Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) alliance. The Jat-Muslim unity that got cemented during the year-long farmers' struggle against the three controversial farm laws has also dented the BJP's dominance.

## DOMINANCE SHAKEN

Sangh Parivar insiders also admit that the second phase of polling witnessed consolidated voting by the Muslim community and by the S.P.'s core vote base consisting predominantly of Yadavs, who are an Other Backward Classes (OBC) community. This, too, is expected to reduce the BJP's tally. In nearly half of these 55 seats falling in western and adjoining areas of central Uttar Pradesh, there is a considerably large Muslim population; these regions are considered to be S.P. strongholds. In nine seats that voted in the second phase, including Rampur, Sambhal, Amroha, Chamraua and Nagina Muslims constitute over 50 per cent of the electorate. In 14 seats, they account for 40 to 50 per cent of the total votes. In other words, in nearly two dozen Assembly constituencies, Muslims can decisively impact the electoral outcome—in some cases on their own, and in others with Dalits and OBC groups. Bijnor has about 43 per cent Muslim voters; Saharanpur, 42 per cent; and Badaun, 23 per cent.

Out of the 55 seats that voted in the second phase, the BJP won 38 in 2017, while the S.P. won 15. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the BJP could establish a lead in only 27 Assembly segments. This time around, the speculation is that even if the BJP does establish a lead, the margins will be much lower than the 2019 ones.

माननीय अखिलेश
अखिलेश यादव

PTI

## PAN-HINDU SUPPORT BASE

In earlier elections in Uttar Pradesh, which are usually multi-phased, polling in western Uttar Pradesh was considered to be crucial. Political observers would comment on the general trend of the election after the voting in western Uttar Pradesh. This time, political observers and practitioners say the trend cannot be determined on the basis of polling in western Uttar Pradesh. Although the Jats have largely deserted the BJP, the pan-Hindu support base that the BJP has built in non-Yadav OBC communities is apparently still intact. These communities— Sainis and Kashyaps for instance—are numerically strong in this region. Similarly, the BJP's hold on the smaller Dalit communities such as Valmikis continues to be strong. The votes of Jatavs, the most dominant Dalit community that forms the core vote base of Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), seem to be getting split into three parts in the current election. The largest chunk is still with the BSP; but given the party leadership's relative inaction on the campaign front, some sections are reportedly moving to the BJP and the S.P. Observers are finding it difficult to quantify this shift to the S.P. and the BJP; this, too, is making it hard to arrive at clear-cut projections on the overall contest after just the first two phases.

After the second phase of polling ended, former Chief Minister and S.P. leader Akhilesh Yadav was confident that his party would be ready to form the next government after the third- and fourth-phase elections scheduled for February 20 and 23. At a rally in Ferozabad, he said: "Everyone has come to know that the S.P. and its allies have hit a century in the first two phases of voting. After the third and fourth phase, we will form the government in Uttar Pradesh." He added that silence would prevail at the BJP's booths by the seventh and final phase of the election.

Meanwhile, the BJP and other Sangh Parivar components continued with their shrill politics of polarisation. If anything it seemed to gather steam after Bhagwat's reported interaction with top activists. Muslim women suddenly found themselves in the middle of a political tug of war with even the BJP trying to woo them.

### POLITICS OF POLARISATION

The timing of the hijab controversy in Karnataka schools was a point to note in this context. The developments in southern India became a talking point in election campaigns. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, publicist par excellence, did not waste any time in projecting himself and his party as the saviour of Muslim women in western Uttar Pradesh. In speech after speech, he focussed on the issues of law and order and safety of Muslim women. Muslim women, on their part, asserted their constitutional right to wear the hijab if they so wished and were very vocal at the booth level.

Between the first and second phases of the election, a student in a college in Jaunpur alleged that her political science professor threw her out of class for wearing a hijab. He called it a burqa and said that if it were up to him, he would ban the head gear from the whole of Uttar Pradesh. She apparently went home in tears without registering a complaint with the Principal, who said he heard about it from the media.

Ram Singh Saini, the BJP candidate from Muslim-majority Amroha, alleged that in many polling booths burqas were used for fake voting. Saini is pitted against the S.P.'s Mehboob Ali and the BSP's Mohammad Naved Ayaz. In 2017, Mehboob Ali won the seat for the S.P., defeating the BSP's Naushad Ali by 15,000 votes.

### HIJAB ROW

In Aligarh district, dozens of young men sporting saffron scarves handed a memorandum to the officials of the Dharma Samaj College seeking a complete ban on the hijab on the college premises. While the college does not allow girls to cover their heads and faces in classrooms, they are free to wear hijabs and burqa anywhere else on campus.

The hijab row also led to an exchange of words between various political leaders. Lok Sabha MP and All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen chief Asaduddin Owaisi tweeted that a day would come when a girl wearing a hijab would be the Prime Minister of India. "I may not be alive to see it, but mark my words, one day a hijab-wearing girl will be the Prime Minister. If our daughters decide and tell their parents they want to wear hijabs, their parents will support them. Let's see who can stop them!"

In response to his tweet, Uttar Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Dinesh Sharma said: "The opposition is conspiring to spread communalism in Uttar Pradesh. The Samajwadi Party's B team is the AIMIM. The fragrance of development is in the State, there is no place for the foul smell of communalism."

Telangana MLA T. Raja Singh of the BJP said: "As long as the BJP is there, no 'burqa-wali' will become the Prime Minister. No matter how much you increase your population, we won't let this dream of yours come true. *Hum Do Humare Do* law will also be implemented soon. We know very well how to put a brake to your population."

The BJP MP Sadhvi Pragya said there was no need to wear the hijab, especially in educational institutions. "No need to wear hijab anywhere. People who are not safe in their houses need to wear hijab. While outside, wherever there is 'Hindu Samaj', they are not required to wear hijab, especially at places where they study," she added. Her statement was met with a lot of ridicule on Twitter. where someone commented that she should use bikes to ride and not for blasts.

But the most vocal of the opinions came from Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Adityanath. In an interview to a news channel, he said that hijab was forced on Muslim women and that no one wore it by choice. "No woman wears hijab by choice. Did women ever accept triple talaq malpractice by choice? Ask those daughters and sisters." He also said that personal clothing was limited to an individual's choice. "I didn't force my sartorial choice on any official. Can I ask everyone at my office to wear

**OUTSIDE A POLLING** booth in Meerut on February 10.

PTI

**CHIEF MINISTER ADITYANATH** (second from left) with BJP leaders at a public meeting in Kanpur on February 18.

*bhagua* [saffron]? Can I say this to everyone in my party? I can't. Everyone should have freedom and if there's an institution, there should be a discipline in that institution," he said.

### MISSING VOTERS

"Missing" voters is the other issue rocking this election. Testimonies from the ground revealed several instances in places like Moradabad and Rampur where the names of Muslim voters are missing from electoral rolls. In 2019, a "No Voter Left Behind" campaign spearheaded by Khalid Saifullah of Raylab Technologies had found that the names of 12 crore Indians were missing from electoral rolls, of whom four crore were Dalits and three crore were Muslims. Some of the weakest sections of society were being disenfranchised. Though no such study has been done for this election, the possibility of large-scale absence of voters is worrying.

The principal opposition S.P. continues to highlight the polarisation efforts of the Sangh Parivar and the issue of missing voters, along with the issues of price rise, unemployment and the many failures of the State's health-care system under the Adityanath government. This campaign has evoked a commendable public response. Even BJP activists grudgingly admit this. Consequently, the morale of S.P. workers is markedly high, and they display great vigour and energy in ground-level campaigns. The S.P. has in fact made this election practically bipolar through concerted campaigns, roadshows and organisational manoeuvres.

### UNCERTAIN OUTCOME

Still, a large number of BJP and Sangh Parivar leaders and workers assert that the Hindutva project that they had advanced over several decades, creating a strong pan-Hindu socio-political constituency across northern India, has ingrained Hindutva sentiments in large segments of the population, especially in the upper-caste communities such as Brahmins and Thakurs and a sizeable number of OBC and Most Backward Caste (MBC) communities. "The ideas of Hindutva are so deep-rooted in the social psyche of these communities that our cadre does not have to make a song and dance like the S.P. workers. More importantly, no other political organisation can match up to our skills in monitoring and managing voters minutely across booth after booth in the State," a senior RSS leader based in Lucknow told *Frontline.*

There is also an opinion, however, that the OBC-MBC consolidation created by the BJP has decisively broken up with the desertion of strong regional leaders like Omprakash Rajbhar and Swami Prasad Maurya. Rajbhar's Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party, along with other smaller allies of the S.P. such as the Mahan Dal and the Janwadi Party (Socialist), is expected to bring crucial contributions to the S.P.-led alliance in the last four phases. Political observers in the State are generally in agreement that the current election is going down to the wire, and the ultimate decider will be the quantum of shift of the OBC-MBC communities from the BJP. ☐

RAVI CHOUDHARY/PTI

# A vote for change?

The high voter turnout, the increase in the number of contestants, and a strong anti-incumbency mood might upset the BJP's plans to retain power in Goa. BY **ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

GOA went to the polls on February 14, and people seemed relaxed even though the lines were long at several voting booths in this tiny coastal State. The weather is lovely in February and residents were enjoying a little peace after a manic holiday and political season. In the run-up to the Assembly election, the State witnessed a fair amount of drama, with new entrants, alliances, defections, family feuds and disgruntled contenders. Towards the end of campaigning, the only picture to emerge from the kaleidoscope of images was that the two national parties, the Congress and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), would dominate the results, with independents and smaller regional parties playing a supportive role.

The significant aspect of this election was the number of candidates contesting from each constituency. Senior citizens said that they had never seen so many choices. According to Election Commission of India (ECI) data, 301 candidates were in the fray this time, from one of the 12 parties or as independents, for the 40 Assembly constituencies. The election in 2017 saw 250 candidates from nine parties or as independents.

Analysts said that although Goa is a small State, the election trend here could have an impact on the elections in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab scheduled soon afterwards. A commentator based in Goa said: "Obviously, the BJP, in its effort to trample over federalism, wants as many States as possible in its bag."

The analysts also said that since the anti-incumbency wave was strong, many more aspirants threw their hats in the ring, perhaps hoping to be part of a ruling coalition. Kalidas Gaunas, the BJP's general secretary for Sanquelim constituency, said: "There is no dearth of people willing to stand for office in Goa. Every candidate thinks he can be a kingmaker and every candidate thinks he can become Chief Minister. Even in Valpoi, which is a clean sweep for [Minister] Vishwajit Rane, there are eight candidates."

While visiting a handful of crucial constituencies, this correspondent found that the residents were holding their cards close to their chest. Few were willing to comment on who they would prefer in the top seat. The only common observation was: "We will vote for the person who has done or will do his job."

### LACK OF CLARITY

If there was little clarity before the election, one is none the wiser after the voting. At a gathering in his constituency in Sanquelim on the day of the election, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant of the BJP told *Frontline*: "We are confident of winning 22 out of the 40 Assembly seats. We will achieve 22 in 2022, a slogan that I have been using for this election."

Asked whether he was nervous about the party's prospects in constituencies in Salcete or South Goa, which is largely Catholic-dominated and therefore not a strong area for the saffron party, he said: "Even if those eight seats do not come through, we will cross the halfway mark with victories in other areas."

**AT A POLLING BOOTH** in Goa on February 14, 2022.

PTI

PTI

**ELECTION OFFICIALS WAITING** at a stadium at Taleigao in Goa before proceeding to their respective polling booths, on February 13, 2022.

The Congress-Goa Forward Party alliance declared to a local television channel that they were confident of winning 26 seats. Observers said that the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) would win at least three of the 13 seats it is contesting. The MGP has partnered with the Trinamool Congress (TMC), which is expected to win at best one seat. Analysts said that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was unpredictable and could pull off a surprise in a couple of seats.

But the real dark horse, they said, could be the little-known Revolutionary Goans (RG), which has fielded 38 candidates without forming an alliance with any party. The RG is a new entrant largely comprising youngsters who say their main goal is to protect the Goan culture and ethos—a slogan that resonates with the youths of the State.

A couple of independents such as Utpal Parrikar, son of the late Manohar Parrikar, former Chief Minister, and Savitri Kavlekar could potentially upset the BJP's applecart.

The MGP, led by Sudin Dhavalikar, is expected to play a role in deciding which party forms the government. The party helped the BJP in 2017 but was tossed out of the coalition when the BJP poached enough defectors to form a majority. The MGP is in a strange spot. It is even more saffron than the BJP. Ideologically, the BJP is an ideal partner, but Dhavalikar has vowed never to tie up with the "turncoats", as he calls them. The TMC attempted to ally with the Congress but was spurned by the grand old party. It will be interesting to see who the MGP goes with.

The Vijai Sardesai-led Goa Forward Party lost two MLAs to the BJP before the election, which has weakened its position and it will likely not be in the driver's seat as it was in the post-poll scenario in 2017, when it won three seats and helped form a coalition that formed the government.

Goa recorded a 78.9 per cent voter turnout in this election, compared to 82.4 per cent in 2017, according to ECI data. The State's population is approximately 18 lakh. Constituencies could comprise anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 voters. Margins are narrow, which means that it is critical that people come out to vote.

A senior Congress worker said: "When the percentage is high, we usually see it as a vote for change. However, we will need to work hard and swiftly to stitch together an alliance if we fall short of the halfway mark. During the last election, we failed to form the government due to the inability of the party to act fast enough with the regional parties and independents."

Subodh Kerkar, a well-known Goan artist and writer who closely monitors elections, said: "The results will throw some surprises. It will not be that straightforward. The BJP does not have Manohar Parrikar. However, it has the might and the resources. This time it is hard to predict the outcome. But the two big parties will certainly be battling it out."

**PRIME MINISTER** Narendra Modi during a campaign rally at Mapusa in North Goa on February 10, 2022.

A political science academic, who wanted to remain unnamed, said that he believed the two-party system with small yet relevant regional parties would continue, but with a shift to Central politics. He told *Frontline*: "I think people are fed up of defections, fragmented and Machiavellian politics which began in Goa in the late 1980s. This time we may see some consolidation with an eye on stability."

He added: "Although it is widely held that caste and religion are not as significant in Goa as in other States, these factors are not irrelevant either. Political parties in Goa need to work through a complex web of variables to pick the right candidate for each constituency. The results will give us an idea of what works."

In 2017, the Congress won 17 seats but the BJP was ahead on the popular vote with 32.5 per cent against the Congress' 28.4 per cent. Significantly, the MGP came in third with 11 per cent of the vote share. According to the academic, the MGP percentage could reveal a bigger picture and a factor that gives it the title of kingmaker. Additionally, independents won 11.1 per cent of the vote share, the AAP 6.3 per cent, Goa Forward 3.5 per cent, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) 2.3 per cent, Goa Surakhsha Manch 1.2 per cent, United Goans Party 0.9 per cent, and Goa Vikas Party 0.6 per cent.

The new entrants in this election are the TMC and the RG. The Shiv Sena is also in the fray, in alliance with the NCP. It has been proven repeatedly that the candidate matters more than the party for most Goan voters. There are plenty of instances of MLAs jumping to another party and being voted back in subsequent byelections. Some examples are Vishwajit Rane, Health Minister, Babush Monserrate, Dayanand Sopte, Jennifer Monserrate, and Chandrakant Kavlekar. This time, Michael Lobo, a disgruntled former BJP member who switched to the Congress, is expected to win from Calangute. Pradeep Naik, a Congress party worker, said: "Michael has done a lot of work for us even though he was not a Minister. Recently, he helped taxi owners by subsidising the cost of the meters they were forced to install. Taxis are a major source of income for many Goans. They were hit badly during the COVID pandemic. If the candidate is known to help, people will reward him or her."

The Valpoi and Poreim constituencies in North Goa have been the stronghold of Vishwajit Rane and his father Pratapsingh Rane, Congress stalwart and three-time Chief Minister. Vishwajit Rane quit the Congress to join the BJP in 2017. But that does not seem to have bothered his constituents, who say he has kept his promises. Pandurang Naik, a restaurant owner in Valpoi, said: "He provided almost 1,200 jobs in the government. That is a big thing."

He added that people in the area trust the Rane family and their vote is essentially for the family. He said: "Divya Rane is standing from the BJP from Poreim. Since Pratapsingh is not contesting, people will vote for his daughter-in-law."

Similarly, Rohan Khaunte, who won as an independent candidate from Porvorim in previous elections and has now joined the BJP, is expected to win regardless of the party he goes with. He joined the BJP in December. According to sources close to Khaunte, he said that he had to join the BJP as the party was stalling his work or did not respond to his demands.

Sadly, the constant party hopping also exposes blatant opportunism. Analysts said that this election would reveal whether people "are truly fed up with it or whether it will be the same old story".

### MODI IN MAPUSA

Manohar Parrikar was the BJP's driving force during the 2017 election. Unfortunately for the BJP, Pramod Sawant has not been able to replicate Parrikar's charisma and ability to co-opt politicians from across parties and also be seen as a trustworthy and competent leader. In fact, Goa Forward's Sardesai said that Parrikar was the only reason he joined the coalition in 2017.

In the absence of Parrikar, the BJP parachuted its big names for campaigning. Home Minister Amit Shah went on a door-to-door campaign a few days before the election, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a rally in Mapusa on February 10.

Felicia Gomes, a local resident in Parra near Mapusa, said: "Prime Ministers have come to Panaji for campaigning but never to Mapusa. I wonder if the BJP is worried."

Delivering his usual rhetoric, Modi talked about Jawaharlal Nehru and how the Congress was responsible for delaying Goa's independence by 15 years. In vintage BJP style, he tried to paint the Congress as callous and anti-national and against true Goans. But local residents said that this line would never work in the State. Felicia Gomes said: "Even [political strategist] Prashant Kishor needs to understand that Goa is unique. All these past issues do not matter. We need employment, support for tourism-related business and good infrastructure." ☐

# 'We will get the support of the poor'

Interview with Charanjit Singh Channi, Chief Minister of Punjab.

BY **ZIYA US SALAM**

PTI

**CHIEF MINISTER CHARANJIT SINGH CHANNI** at an election rally in Rupnagar on January 4.

IN September 2021, when Charanjit Singh Channi was appointed the Chief Minister of Punjab, few outside the State had heard of him. For most people, the Indian National Congress in Punjab was synonymous with Captain Amarinder Singh, the man Channi displaced. The fact that Channi was the first Dalit Chief Minister of the State surprised many, considering almost every third voter in Punjab is from the Scheduled Caste community. There were challenges yet for Channi as Pradesh Congress Committee chief Navjot Singh Sidhu failed to reconcile himself to the rise of Channi after the Captain's departure. Even as election momentum picked up, and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the principal opposition party, began to make inroads into what was considered a safe territory for the Congress, internal bickering continued in the party, putting at risk all the gains accumulated by the appointment of a Dalit Chief Minister. It was barely two weeks before the February 20 election that Channi was formally declared the Congress' chief ministerial candidate.

Unflustered, Channi trains his guns on the AAP, talks of its alleged Hindutva politics, and expresses confidence that the Congress will form the government with a two-thirds majority. Travelling between Dhurri and Kotkapura, Channi spoke to *Frontline* ahead of another "Navi Soch, Nava Punjab" rally. Excerpts from the interview:

**You are approaching the election with the slogan of "111 Days of Channi" although the Congress has been in power for five years.**

I have to go by what I have done. I cannot seek votes on what Captain [Amarinder Singh] did or did not do. Let Captain seek votes for that period with the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] for that. I am responsible for my time. As a candidate I believe in seeking votes for my work.

**After 111 days in the Chief Minister's chair, you are now the chief ministerial candidate. Is this the most important election of your career?**

Every election is important. This one is important because I have to repay the faith the party has reposed in me. I have to live up to the expectations of all Congressmen and the party. If it had been only my election, it may not have been as important. The party is greater than the individual.

**You are contesting from both Chamkaur Sahib and Bhadaur. Is it owing to a lack of confidence that you might not be able to win at the former?**

No, this is a strategy. In that area (Bhadaur), the AAP people thought they were ahead. By my entry there, things have changed. We decided to take them head-on.

**Is it your version of what Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls "ghar mein ghus kar marenge [We will enter your home to beat you]"?**

Yes, it is like that only. I would say it was important to send a message to the electorate that we are there with them. There was no question of taking a step back.

**The media as well as pre-election surveys show that the AAP is ahead of the Congress in the run-up to the election.**

[Arvind] Kejriwal has made a lot of money in Delhi. And he is hiring agencies for such surveys, throwing money. It does not matter. Last time, in 2017, the AAP was touted to get 100 seats and they got 20. Now they are saying they will get a simple majority. That means they will get 10 seats.

**But the AAP is getting a good response in Dalit areas that were a Congress stronghold. Many voters seem to want change...**

You must also understand the truth of it. There is no presence of the AAP in Doaba. It is finished. They were concentrating on Malwa. I went there. They are lagging behind there too. A lot of AAP hype is more in the media than on the ground. I go to the grassroots level myself. I understand it well.

**How much of an effect will Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's presence have on the Congress, considering many senior leaders have kept away?**

The people of Punjab love Priyanka. She is married into a Punjabi family. She is soft-spoken, cultured. She is a good leader. As the daughter of the Gandhi family, she has great following. Women in particular love her. She talks of their issues, understands their psyche. They warm up to her.

**Priyanka Gandhi Vadra also accused the AAP of originating from the RSS. Do you agree?**

Well, Kejriwal himself said so in a video.

**But he was talking about himself, not the party...**

Actually, he is looking ahead to the 2024 election. He wants to tread the path of Hindutva. He wants to present a counter to the BJP. It won't help Punjab in any way. Punjab has always rejected sectarian politics.

**This time, the AAP's election campaign is indirectly stoking religious sentiments. Their leaders wondered why a Hindu could not be the Chief Minister of Punjab. How do you look at it?**

Yes, I know. The BJP and the AAP are two sides of the same coin. They are experts at arousing religious sentiments. But we are a secular party, we take everybody along. We believe in "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas"...

**But that is the slogan of the Prime Minister...**

*Arrey*, how does it matter? You know, and everybody knows, that the Congress has always believed in it. For the BJP, it is a mere slogan. We all know how the Prime Minister functions. For us, it is a way of life.

**Can we expect a better rapport between you and Prime Minister Modi considering what transpired during the election campaign? (When the Prime Minister had gone to address a rally in Punjab, Channi was not allowed to fly.)**

When was our relationship sour? He is our Prime Minister; I am a Chief Minister. Wherever he calls me, I will go. I have every respect for him.

**But you said: "I am not a terrorist. Yet I was not allowed to fly."**

That is not about the Prime Minister. The people around did not let me go within a hundred kilometres of where he was. That was the problem. I wondered, "I am a Chief Minister. I am also a people's representative. What was the big problem if my helicopter landed there too?"

**What are the basic issues on which the Congress is**

> 'The BJP and the AAP are two sides of the same coin. They are experts at arousing religious sentiments. But we are a secular party, we take everybody along. We believe in "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas"'

**seeking votes this time?**

We are asking for votes on our work during 111 days of government. We are seeking votes on our credibility, our skill and talent.

**You talked of farmers' debt.**

Yes, we talk of waiving the debt of farmers. We talk of compensation for farmers' property. We talk of waiving electricity charges, making water more affordable. We have made petrol and diesel cheaper. There has been upgradation of schools; we are building a new university. We have done a lot of work in a short time, some 150 things.

**While you recount all these achievements, the message does not always reach the common man. Is packaging a problem with the Congress?**

It was the same during Manmohan Singh's time as the Prime Minister. A lot of work was done but the message did not percolate down. We may not have succeeded fully either but still people know what we have done.

**All these achievements sound good, but Captain Amarinder Singh said that the State's treasury is empty.**

The treasury was empty for Captain Amarinder Singh because he did not want to work. Now he says, when Channi is the Chief Minister, how come money is available? Treasury is never empty. Every day money flows in, every day expenses are made.

**The Captain also alleged that there was corruption in the Congress at all levels.**

Was he corrupt himself? He didn't speak a word for four and a half years. After he was removed, he started making these allegations. Why did he tolerate corrupt people for so long? Why did he compromise with such people? Why did he not take action? It is only because he has been removed that he is speaking now.

**Do you agree that during the Captain's time, the government was being run from Delhi?**

See, from the first day, he was in league with the Akalis and the BJP. He did not ever call himself a Congressman. He always called it his government, not the Congress government.

**If that is true, why did you not raise your voice earlier?**

I have been at it from the first day, but he had such a stature that it took so long for the party to realise the truth. He was a maharajah, twice Chief Minister, M.P., MLA, everything. So it took long to break that aura.

**Did the high command in Delhi not take too long to decide?**

Well, it took long because the party had to think of the consequences of removing a man with such a stature. Ultimately, it proved to be a good decision, The Congress survived in Punjab because of that.

**But is not the Congress still a divided house? Sunil Jakhar has quit electoral politics; Navjot Sidhu's daughter keeps throwing barbs.**

If Jakhar is not fighting elections, it does not mean that it is a divided house. Jakhar's nephew is contesting the election (from Abohar). Not contesting elections is a personal decision. He remains a Congressman. As far as Sidhu is concerned, well, if you are in a family, you have to ignore a few things. The family has to progress. Not everything remains fine all the time.

**Amarinder Singh made Malerkotla the first Muslim-majority district in Punjab. Are there any specific issues of the community you plan to address?**

We have given money for building a Haj House there. We are all together; I respect all castes and religions. Whatever we need to do for the economic uplift of people, we will do.

**Your party supported the farmers when the farm ordinances were brought in by the Centre. Yet today, the Congress has failed to capitalise on that support.**

I agree, but now the farmers have built their own group and are fighting elections. They have a right to do that. I am confident that whatever support we used to get from the farmers in the past, we will not only maintain that but improve upon it.

**What about the Dalit vote? After all, you are the face of the election campaign.**

On the same lines, we will get the Dalit vote en bloc. But I don't see it as Dalit vote, I see it as poor and rich voters. We will get the support of the poor and middle-class families. Whether they are farmers, workers or in service is immaterial.

**So, you feel that the Congress is poised to win the election, irrespective of opinion polls?**

We are winning a by two-thirds majority. It will be in front of you all. We are confident. ☐

# Territory in focus

Territorial integrity is the dominant election issue in Manipur, but in Naga-majority constituencies, ruling and opposition parties speak of development, Naga peace talks, Naga identity and repeal of the AFPSA.

BY **SUSHANTA TALUKDAR**

THE issue of "territorial integrity" has become one of the key election issues in Manipur, with the ruling and opposition parties clarifying their stand on the subject in their election manifestos. The spotlight turned on the issue as the Naga People's Front (NPF), a constituent of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition government, made the expedition of Naga peace talks and Naga identity its rallying points for seeking electoral support. (Elections to the 60-member Assembly will be held in two phases on February 27 and March 5.)

RITUR RAJ KONWAR

**CHIEF MINISTER**
N. Biren Singh is confident of the BJP's return to power.

The BJP's manifesto, which was released by its national president J.P. Nadda in Imphal on February 17, promised to preserve the territorial integrity of Manipur and the rights and culture of indigenous communities. The Common Agenda proposed by the Congress-led five-party Manipur Progressive Secular Alliance has promised to "secure territorial integrity of Manipur and its historical boundaries". The National People's Party (NPP), the BJP's coalition partner, has promised constitutional safeguards for the territorial integrity of Manipur. The NPP, the BJP and the NPF are contesting against each other after sharing power for five years.

The National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), the rebel group that is engaged in peace talks with the Centre, has launched a campaign in the election-bound State on the importance of Naga peace talks and the Framework Agreement that the NSCN (I-M) and the government signed in 2015. This will keep the issue of territorial integrity at centre stage in the run-up to the election.

In 2017, political parties made territorial integrity an election plank but at that time the contents of the Framework Agreement were not known to the parties, the candidates and the electorate of the Naga-majority hills and Meitei-majority valley districts. The Naga peace talks reached a deadlock in 2019 over the interpretation of the Framework Agreement by the NSCN(I-M) and the Centre and the NSCN(I-M)'s insistence on a separate flag and constitution for Nagas as an assertion of Naga sovereignty in all Naga-inhabited areas.

The Centre offered to create Naga Regional Territorial Councils (NRTC) in the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution so that territorial integrity of the two States was protected. The NSCN(I-M) has been insisting that the NRTC governments must have "sovereign powers as envisioned in the Framework Agreement". While releasing a copy of the Framework Agreement, the rebel group claimed that any solution to the Naga political problem must be on the principle of "shared sovereignty" included in the agreement, but the Centre ruled out any solution outside the Indian Constitution.

## AUTONOMOUS DISTRICT COUNCILS

Manipur has six autonomous district councils (ADCs) constituted under the Manipur Hill Areas District Councils Act, 1971, with the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) comprising all 20 legislators from the hill districts as its members. Under Article 371 (C) of the Constitution, the HAC can make modifications in the rules of business of the government and in the rules of the State Assembly and for any special responsibility of the Governor in order to secure the proper functioning of the committee. The HAC drafted a Bill and sent it to the government for tabling in the Assembly. The Naga and Kuki civil society organisations in the hills supported it and resorted to agitation, while organisations in the Meitei-majority valley districts opposed it, which kept the political pot boiling in the last year of the incumbent government. Chief Minister N. Biren Singh promised that his government was committed to strengthening the ADCs by giving more autonomy to the district councils within the ambit of the Constitution.

In Naga-majority constituencies in the hill districts, ruling and opposition parties pushed for issues such as development, Naga peace talks, Naga identity and repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958.

## NPF ELECTION RALLY

The NPF's campaign commenced with a rally in Senapati hill district with Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio calling upon Nagas to unite. Promising his support and that of his Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) to the NPF, Rio said that a solution to the Naga political problem would pave the way for an increase in the number of Assembly and parliamentary constituencies among other things.

Speaking at the rally, T.R. Zeliang, former Nagaland Chief Minister and veteran NPF leader, asserted that the NPF was the only party that was serious about the Naga political issue. He said he was convinced that a solution to the Naga political problem would be "inclusive, honourable and acceptable as aspired by Naga people". Both leaders urged voters to elect NPF candidates to show their support for a peaceful solution to the vexed Naga political problem.

Rio's acceptance of the NPF's invitation to campaign in Manipur has given rise to the speculation of a likely merger of the NDPP and the NPF ahead of the 2023 Nagaland Assembly election.

An NSCN(I-M) press release issued on February 15 stated that "a discourse on the Naga political dialogue was organised for the 57 Henglep Assembly constituency at the ANSAM (All Naga Students' Association, Manipur) Conference Hall, Tahamzan (Senapati district) HQ on February 9. It was attended by all the village authorities, civil society organisations, youth wings, and students' organisations. They extended their fullest support to the ongoing Indo-Naga political talks based on the Framework Agreement on August 3, 2015." The meeting adopted a four-point declaration through which the Rongmei people of the Loktak project area under the Henglep constituency declared that they would appeal to the NSCN and the Government of India "to expedite the Indo-Naga peace process based on the Framework Agreement inclusive of the Naga national flag and the Naga constitution (Yehzabo)" and insisted that "the solution should be inclusive, honourable and acceptable to the Naga people based on the uniqueness of the Naga history".

## BJP'S PROMISE

The BJP hopes that development issues will overshadow the issue of territorial integrity. The party manifesto has promised to continue the "Go to Hills" and "Go to Villages" missions of the incumbent government if re-elected. The BJP's election promises include free "Scooty" to all meritorious college-going girls, free laptops to all meritorious students passing class 12 and scholarship to children of small, marginal and landless farmers pursuing technical education, an increase in the monthly pension of senior citizens from Rs.200 to Rs.1,000 and establishment of a skill university to empower women and girl children, youth, farmers, poor and marginalised people.

Biren Singh tweeted after a public meeting in the Ukhrul Assembly constituency that "with such love and support for BJP, my confidence level of sweeping this election has been taken a notch higher".

While the BJP is confident of securing an absolute majority, an internal survey has boosted the Congress' confidence of recapturing power. Bhakta Charan Das, All India Congress Committee (AICC) in-charge of Manipur election, claimed that the party's prospects were "very good". He told *Frontline* that the survey conducted after the nomination process started had indicated clear victories for its candidate in about 34 seats. He, however, said the Congress kept the post-election alliance option open. Asked if the Congress was planning to ally with the NPP or the NPF, Das said: "I would not like to take any name as no dialogue has taken place so far."

The Congress is pinning its hopes on the NPP eating into the BJP votes. He said a negative perception had shaped about the BJP-led government as the two parties were fighting each other after sharing power for five years. The Naga-majority seat was among the nine seats in the hills that the Congress won in 2017.

With campaigning intensifying, allegations of violence raised by the Congress and the NPP have a cast shadow over the conduct of the election. The NPP lodged complaints with the Chief Electoral Officer, Manipur, about alleged incidents of attacks and threats to its candidates by a section of insurgent outfits currently under Suspension of Operations (SoO). It alleged that the outfits came out in open support of BJP and NPF candidates and demanded that the Election Commission put all "underground groups under SoO in their respective designated camps and declare all constituencies that have presence of underground outfits as 'most sensitive' and deploy additional security".

A Congress delegation submitted a memorandum to the electoral officer on February 16 alleging that the "BJP was indulging in pre-poll violence". It brought to his attention 14 incidents of attacks and intimidation in six Assembly constituencies. The opposition demanded deployment of Central paramilitary forces and the Central Reserved Police Force to replace the State Police to ensure a free, democratic, and peaceful election process.

The BJP spokesperson Soubam Nongpoknganba Meitei dismissed as "baseless" allegations made by the Congress and the NPP. He said a clear picture would emerge after the conclusion of investigations in some cases. He said the BJP's organisational machinery made it possible for the party to connect with the people, and the party's internal surveys and "our good achievement in the last five years" gave it the confidence that it would get an absolute majority. In response to a question, Nongpoknganba, however, said the "door remains open for a post-election alliance", keeping alive speculation on the prospects of the election. □

# Cracks in Trinamool

As the ruling party continues to dominate West Bengal politics, speculation about a rift between Mamata Banerjee and her nephew has given rise to confusion and bickering within the party.

BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

ON February 14, the ruling Trinamool Congress continued its victory streak by winning all four important municipal corporations of West Bengal —Siliguri, Bidhannagar, Asansol and Chandannagar—that went to polls on February 12 and appeared poised to dominate in the upcoming elections to 108 civic bodies across the State on February 27. With the opposition in the State all but decimated, never has the Trinamool in its 11 years in power appeared as invincible as now.

Yet, at the height of its power, the party is facing one of its most severe internal crises. Differences in party policies and factional hostilities have come to the fore amid speculation of a growing rift between Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and her nephew Abhishek Banerjee, long considered her heir apparent in the party. Top leaders have been seen openly savaging each other verbally and through social media.

At the same time, relations between the Trinamool and its political adviser, Prashan Kishor's Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), have turned frosty. Matters came to such a head that Mamata Banerjee had to dissolve all national party posts, including that of Abhishek Banerjee who had been recently made the all-India general secretary of the party, and constitute a new national working committee.

What has been most alarming for the party is that a section of the leadership known to be close to Abhishek Banerjee was perceived to be trying to undermine Mamata Banerjee's supreme authority. Ostensibly, the issue of implementing the policy of 'one person one post' within the party has been the crux of the strife; but political observers suggest that the problem may be more complex.

PTI

**CHIEF MINISTER** Mamata Banerjee and her nephew Abhishek Banerjee at her Kalighat residence after her thumping victory in the byelection from the Bhabanipur Assembly constituency, on October 3, 2021.

Mamata Banerjee had initially welcomed the 'one person one post' policy, which Abhishek Banerjee advocated strongly soon after the Trinamool returned to power in 2021. Differences arose within the party when it became clear during the nomination of candidates for the

Kolkata Municipal Corporation elections that Mamata Banerjee had changed her opinion on the policy. According to sources, she overruled many of the recommendations made by Abhishek and I-PAC and handpicked her loyalists and their family members, including six MLAs and one MP, to contest in the elections. A clear message that Mamata Banerjee's word was final was sent across to I-PAC and Abhishek, who had both played key roles in the Trinamool's massive victory in the Assembly election.

### 'DIAMOND HARBOUR MODEL'

Following the ruling party's overwhelming victory in the Kolkata Municipal (KMC) election on December 21, 2021, as the Trinamool geared up for elections in the Siliguri, Asansol, Chandannagar and Bidhannagar municipal corporations in the midst of a COVID surge, certain statements and actions of Abhishek Banerjee appeared to subtly undermine and even embarrass the government.

Even as the Chief Minister was determined to allow the Ganga Sagar Mela to take place in the State and also hold the civic elections, Abhishek publicly said that it was his "personal" opinion that all political and social events should be postponed until the pandemic situation improved. He was widely lauded in social circles for this statement.

He also projected a model of COVID management in his own Lok Sabha constituency of Diamond Harbour, which focussed on increased testing and vaccination. Many, including Trinamool leaders loyal to Mamata Banerjee, felt that this promotion of the "Diamond Harbour Model" was a deliberate attempt to project the State government's COVID management in poor light.

### WAR OF WORDS

Two distinct camps within the party suddenly came to the fore, and a no-holds-barred war of words ensued. Senior leader and Lok Sabha member Kalyan Banerjee questioned the so-called "Diamond Harbour Model" and emphasised that the party had only one leader and that was Mamata Banerjee. Almost immediately, posters demanding Kalyan Banerjee's removal appeared in his constituency of Serampore. A section of young Trinamool leaders known to be close to Abhishek Banerjee sprang to his support and openly questioned his exclusion from the State's administration. On February 2, Mamata Banerjee was re-elected as party chairperson unanimously and unopposed.

According to the political observer Biswanath Chakraborty, the "clash" between Mamata Banerjee and her nephew had as much to do with "emotional issues" as with power politics.

"It is not as if Abhishek is going to take over from Mamata Banerjee any time soon. But she cannot accept that the Diamond Harbour model is more successful than her own handling of the pandemic; nor can she approve of someone in her party expressing in public an independent opinion regarding the need to postpone religious functions because of the COVID situation; nor can she tolerate any snubbing of old-timers loyal to her; nor can she accept Prashant Kishor's team deciding everything within the party on behalf of Abhishek Banerjee. She is apprehensive that someone else will take away her thunder. That is why before any announcement her party leaders invoke her name and end by mentioning her again. She is sending a warning to Abhishek to not undermine her. It is basically a family melodrama," he told *Frontline*.

The situation worsened during the nomination of candidates for 108 election-bound civic bodies across the State. A list of candidates that Mamata Banerjee had apparently not approved was posted on the party's social media handles, leading to widespread protest and confusion among Trinamool workers and leaders. Party activists burnt tyres and staged violent demonstrations against their own party, and leaders had to be deployed to different parts to quell the unrest. Finally, the situation was resolved when a new and

THE HINDU

**PRASHANT KISHOR,** who is widely perceived to be the chief architect of the Trinamool's massive victory in the 2021 Assembly election.

SUSHANTA PATRONOBISH

**MAYOR FIRHAD HAKIM.** He had to announce at a press conference that the Trinamool did not endorse the "one person one post" campaign.

PTI

**TRINAMOOL LEADER** Sougata Roy. He has said he completely endorses "one person one post".

PTI

**TRINAMOOL CONGRESS SUPPORTERS** celebrating after the party's win in the Bidhannagar municipal elections, at Salt Lake in Kolkata on February 14, 2022.

"official" list was drawn up, under Mamata Banerjee's supervision, and signed by two most senior leaders, Partha Chatterjee and Subrata Bakshi. I-PAC was accused of posting the first list without the party's approval. I-PAC's close ties with Abhishek are no secret, and for long there has been a growing resentment among a section of the leadership against the organisation's "interference" in the party's internal political matters.

### RAGING CONTROVERSY

In the prevailing confusion even sections of the top leadership turned upon one another openly. A statement by one leader was almost immediately refuted or condemned by another, and certain statements appeared to be made in a calculated manner to embarrass the party. Amid speculation about an open rift between I-PAC and the Trinamool, the senior leader and Lok Sabha member Sougata Roy said: "I do not know what the contract with I-PAC was, but that contract does not exist anymore. It may not be a major loss for the party, but it is certainly a setback... I-PAC played a significant role behind the Trinamool's victory in the Assembly elections." He also stated that he "completely endorsed" the 'one person one post' policy, which seemed to be the key issue behind the Trinamool's internal crisis. In the midst of the raging controversy, a new problem emerged in the form of a social media campaign in support of 'one person one post' by a section of leaders close to Abhishek Banerjee. Even members of Mamata Banerjee's family joined the campaign.

Mamata loyalists condemned it and said it was against the party's interests. Chandrima Bhattacharya, Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare, even alleged that I-PAC had uploaded the #OneParty-OnePost campaign on her social media profile without her permission. "A Twitter account in my name was created by I-PAC before the elections. Today, it posted something about one person one post without my knowledge. I strongly oppose it," she said. Hours later, I-PAC countered in a social media message: "I-PAC doesn't handle any digital properties of @AITCofficial or any of its leaders. Anyone making such claim is either uninformed or is blatantly lying. AITC should look into if and how their digital properties and/or that of their leaders are being 'allegedly (mis)used'."

The developments indicated that there were concerted attempts to highlight the campaign on social media and even Ministers were not spared. Finally, Firhad Hakim, senior Cabinet Minister and Mayor of Kolkata, had to go on record saying that the Trinamool as a party did not endorse the "one person, one post" campaign. "This campaign which is being run on social media to confuse people.... is not in the interest of the party. There is also another resolution, that is, the chairperson's decision is the final," Hakim said at a press conference. Even after Hakim's statement, some of the leaders did not change their social media status in which they voiced their endorsement of the 'one party one post' policy.

The situation seemed to degenerate into a free-for-all in which unrelated issues and old grudges started surfacing. Party spokesperson Kunal Ghosh suddenly turned upon an ailing Mukul Roy, who had switched back to the Trinamool from the BJP after the Assembly elections. "CBI & ED should arrest BJP leader Mukul Roy in Saradha and Narada case. I have already sent them a letter praying joint interrogation with him. He is an influential conspirator. He has used different parties only for his personal protection. Mukul Roy should not be spared," he said on social media. It must be remembered that Kunal Ghosh himself was behind bars for around three years for his role in the multi-crore Saradha scam in which lakhs of poor people were ruined.

### A PATCH-UP?

Mamata Banerjee called an "emergency meeting" with seven top leaders of the party on February 12, in which she dissolved all national posts of the party, including that of Abhishek Banerjee who was present at the meeting, and set up a new 20-member National Working Committee. Abhishek Banerjee was included in the new Committee.

Six days later, on February 18, Abhishek Banerjee was re-installed as all-India general secretary. With his reinstatement to the top post, it may appear that the situation within the party is returning to normal. However, many political observers feel that the emotional scar left within the party may still take some time to heal. □

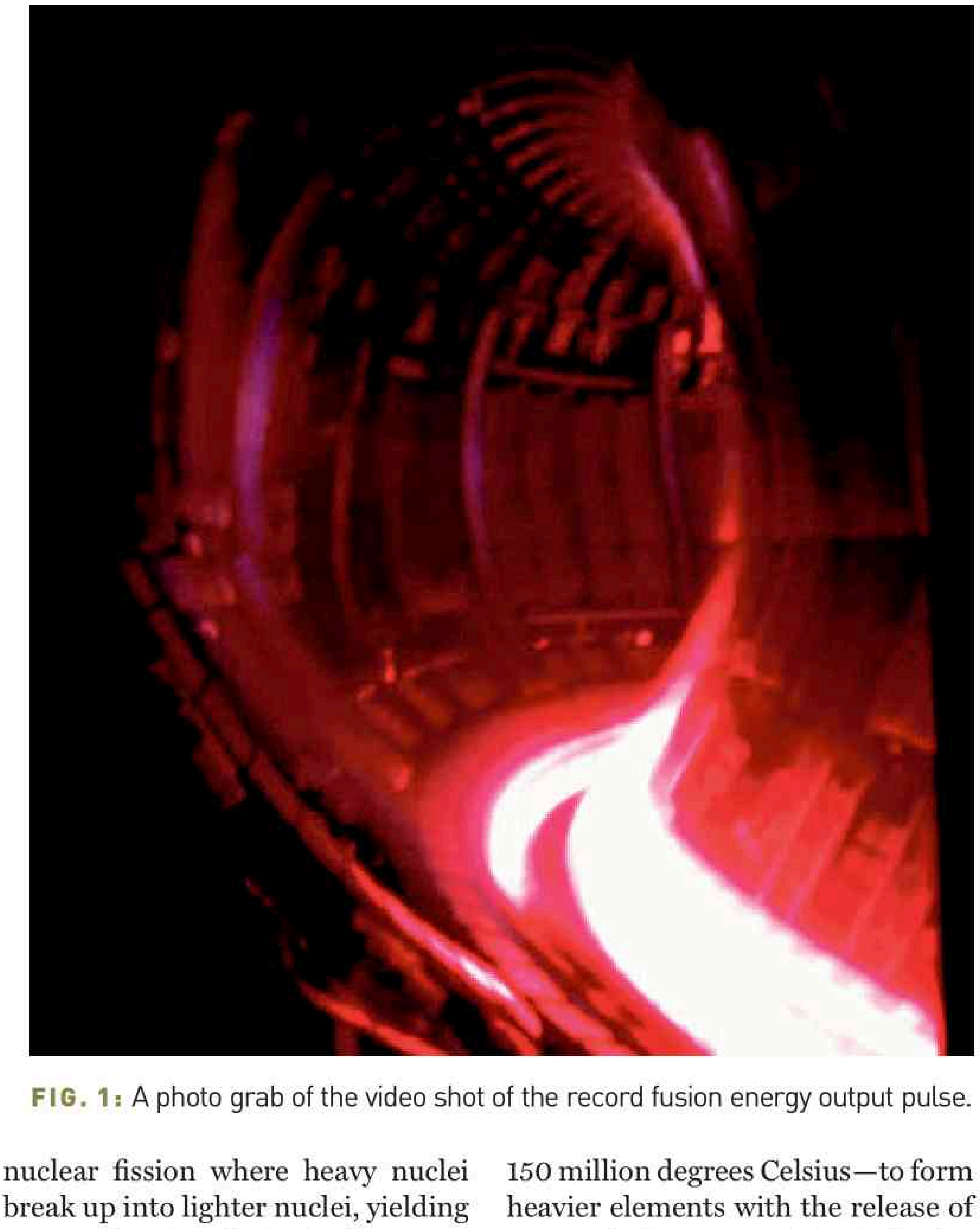
# Game changer

In December, the JET fusion energy project broke the 24-year-old record of energy output achieved by nuclear fusion. This has laid the foundation for the eventual large-scale production of fusion energy and possibly a path towards a sustainable and clean energy future.

BY **R. RAMACHANDRAN**

AT any point of time since around the 1950s, we have heard scientists telling us that our ability to tap nuclear fusion, the process that powers the burning and shining of the sun and other stars, as a source of limitless, clean and safe energy is at least another 50 years away. Maybe, not any more. With the latest developments in fusion research at the experimental nuclear fusion reactor called the Joint European Torus (JET) in the United Kingdom, the feasibility of realising that dream is now perhaps closer than ever before.

On December 21, 2021, JET, which is operating at the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy (CCFE) of the U.K. Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) in Oxfordshire, broke the 24-year-old record of energy output achieved by the fusion of nuclei of deuterium (D) and tritium (T), the two heavier isotopes of hydrogen (H), the most abundant element in the universe (Fig. 1). On February 9, 2022, the UKAEA and EUROfusion—the European Consortium for the Development of Fusion Energy, which runs this facility and comprises 30 research organisations from the 27 European Union member states and 3 from the U.K., Switzerland and Ukraine—made public announcements of this landmark achievement.



EUROFUSION CONSORTIUM

**FIG. 1:** A photo grab of the video shot of the record fusion energy output pulse.

The production of nuclear electricity that is delivered to homes at present is based on the process of nuclear fission where heavy nuclei break up into lighter nuclei, yielding energy. Nuclear fusion is its opposite, that is, lighter elements (lighter than iron), such as isotopes of hydrogen and helium, fuse together at very high temperatures—at about 100-150 million degrees Celsius—to form heavier elements with the release of energy in the form of heat. Fusion reactions involving the lightest of nuclei, namely hydrogen and its isotopes, yield the highest amount of energy (Fig. 2).

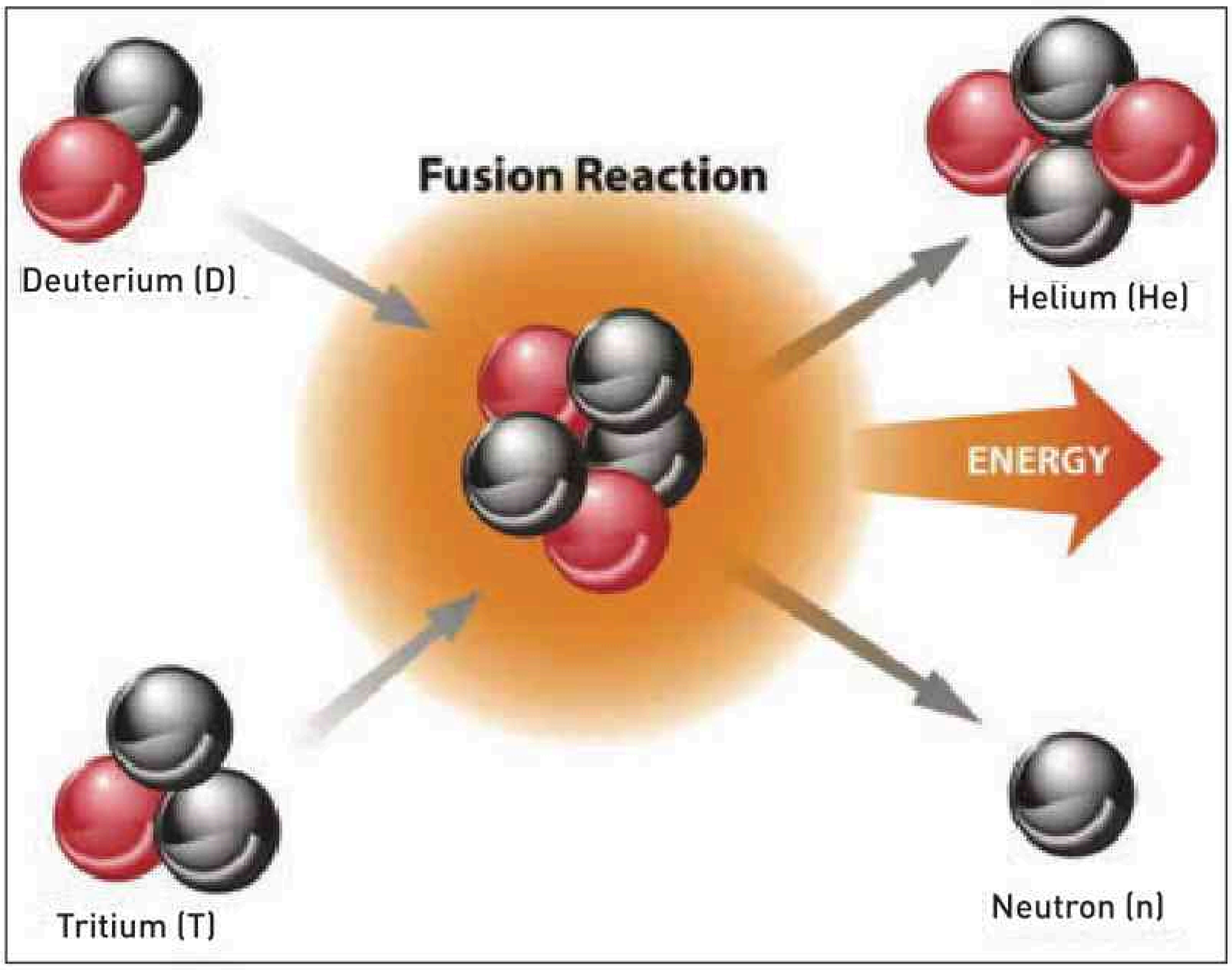


**FIG. 2:** In D-T fusion, two isotopes of hydrogen, deuterium ($^2H$) and tritium ($^3H$), are brought together. The fusion reaction generates helium ($^4He$), a neutron and a large amount of energy, with the chargeless neutron carrying 80 per cent of it.

The problem in harnessing energy from nuclear fusion has been in making fusion reactions happen in a controlled and sustained fashion so that the energy released can be continuously tapped. If this can be achieved in suitably designed future fusion power plants, the world will have in its hands a near-limitless source of energy without the attendant huge problem of nuclear waste that one is faced with in operating the fission-based nuclear reactors of today. More importantly, fusion reactors will not undergo meltdowns as happened at the Chernobyl or Fukushima plants.

In a tweet on February 9, the UKAEA said: "Record-breaking 59 megajoules [MJ] of sustained fusion energy at world-leading UKAEA's JET facility." It posted a video of the record-breaking five-second pulse inside JET's doughnut-shaped internal vessel, called a "tokamak", at https://twitter.com/i/status/1491381459181248515. This fusion energy output of 59 MJ is nearly 2.7 times the output of 21.7 MJ that JET achieved in 1997 in a pulse that lasted about four seconds (Fig. 3).

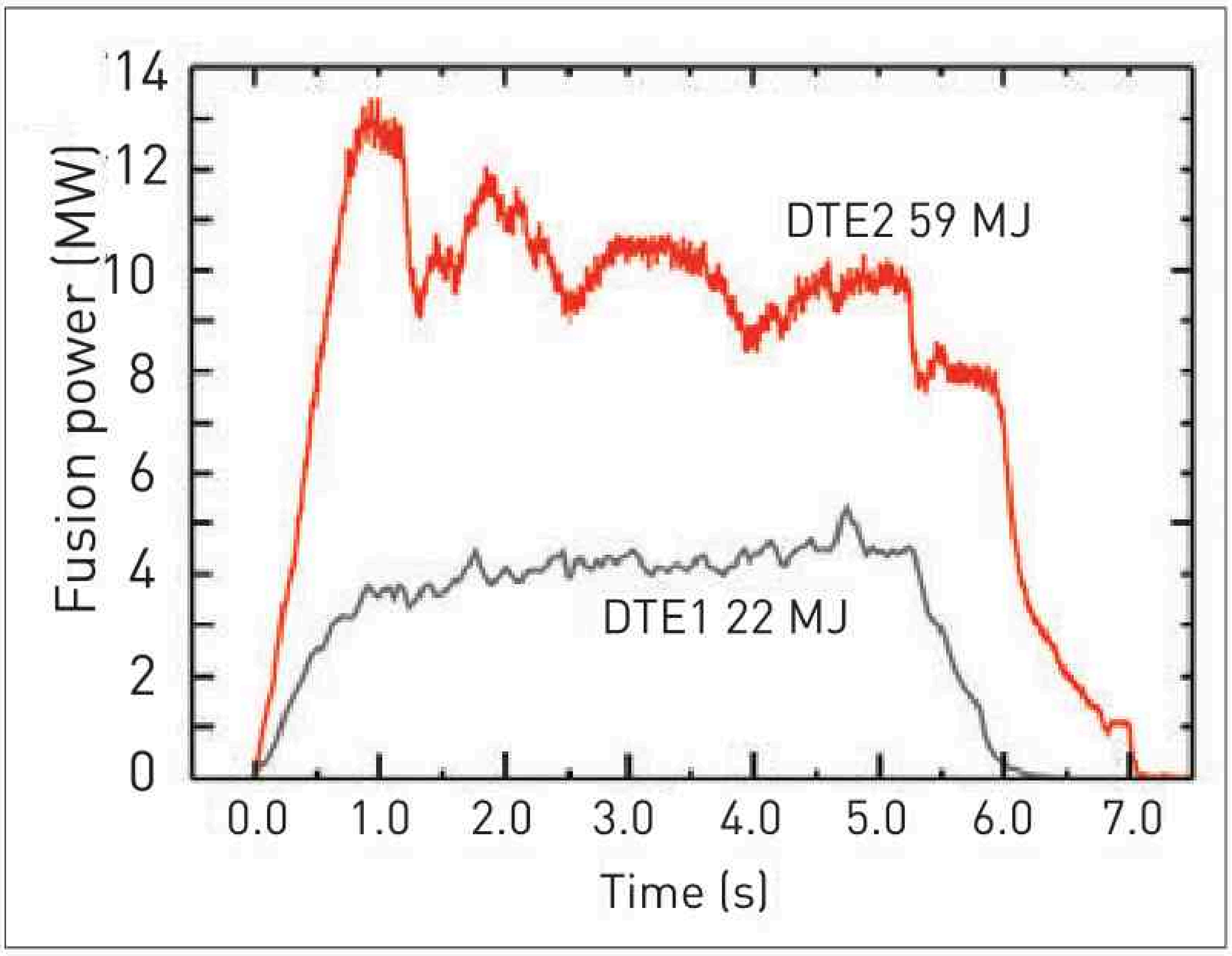
For the five seconds that the experiment ran, the power output was equivalent to what four on-shore wind turbines would produce. That is to say, that the experiment was able to generate commercial-scale power. Also, significantly, the short duration of five seconds was not because of any systemic failure or fuel disruptions (events during which the fusion energy drops very rapidly) that stop the fusion reactions in the reactor core and the production of energy, as had been the case in earlier experiments, but because the equipment of this laboratory set-up got too hot to keep the experiment running. According to scientists, in the next-generation reactors, which will have suitable cryogenic equipment and cooling apparatus, the fusion process should be sustainable for much longer periods.

However, so far, in none of the fusion experiments around the world, including the latest runs at JET, has the output fusion energy exceeded the energy put in to initiate fusion among the swirling gas of nuclei in the reactor core. But these new results are seen as bringing researchers closer than ever before to that goal of "scientific break-even" (or, in technical language, attaining a Q-value equal to 1) when the output energy at least equals the input energy. Scientists also believe that results at JET are a pointer to electricity from nuclear fusion becoming a reality in 20-25 years from now.

"The record, and more importantly the things we've learned about fusion under these conditions, and how it fully confirms our predictions, show that we are on the right path to a future world of fusion energy," said Tony Donné, CEO of the EUROfusion programme. "If we can maintain fusion for five seconds, we can do it for five minutes and then five hours as we scale up our operations in future machines," he said.

More significantly, the present achievement makes the success of the ambitious $22-billion International Thermonuclear Energy Reactor (ITER, pronounced "eater") look more promising because JET uses the same technology and fuel mix (of D and T nuclei) as ITER. An international project aimed at building a commercial-scale experimental fusion reactor, ITER is set to begin operations by 2025. Although, as a mock-up, the six metre-sized JET is only a tenth of the ITER reactor's volume, it has been used as the test bed to validate many of the ideas and physical scenarios that form the basis of ITER. "For the ITER project," said Bernard Bigot, director general of ITER, "the JET results are a strong confidence builder that we are on the right track as we move forward toward demonstrating full fusion power."

(ITER, designed to demonstrate the scientific and technological feasibility of fusion power, will be the world's largest experimental fusion facility ("A nuclear leap", *Frontline*, January 27, 2006). The participating entities in this international joint venture are Europe (which is contributing almost half the cost of its construction), China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and the United States (contributing equally to the rest). The facility is under construction in Saint-Paul-lez-Durance, southern



EUROFUSION CONSORTIUM

**FIG. 3:** The new world fusion energy record of 59 megajoules (DTE2, in red) is over two-and-a-half times the previous record reached during JET's earlier deuterium-tritium experiments in 1997 (DTE1, in grey).

France, where the French Cadarache nuclear research facility is located, and is fast nearing completion.)

### SAFE & SUSTAINABLE

Ian Chapman, Chief Executive of the UKAEA, said in a statement: "These landmark results, have taken us a huge step closer to conquering one of the biggest scientific and engineering challenges of them all." The results are being seen as the clearest demonstration in 25 years of the potential fusion energy has to deliver safe and sustainable low-carbon energy that will combat the effects of climate change by decarbonising energy production. In fact, given the spectacular advances in fusion research in recent years, particularly at JET, the UKAEA hosted a series of events in Glasgow in November 2021 at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's Conference of the Parties (COP26) to convey the emerging importance of nuclear fusion in meeting future global energy demand. In a message to COP26, Chapman said: "Fusion energy is low carbon, safe, efficient and the fuels exist in abundance. It's a game changer for our global energy future. I'm in no doubt that fusion will be a complementary part of the energy mix for generations to come. It's one of the biggest scientific and engineering quests in history ... and the rewards for success will be huge for our planet."

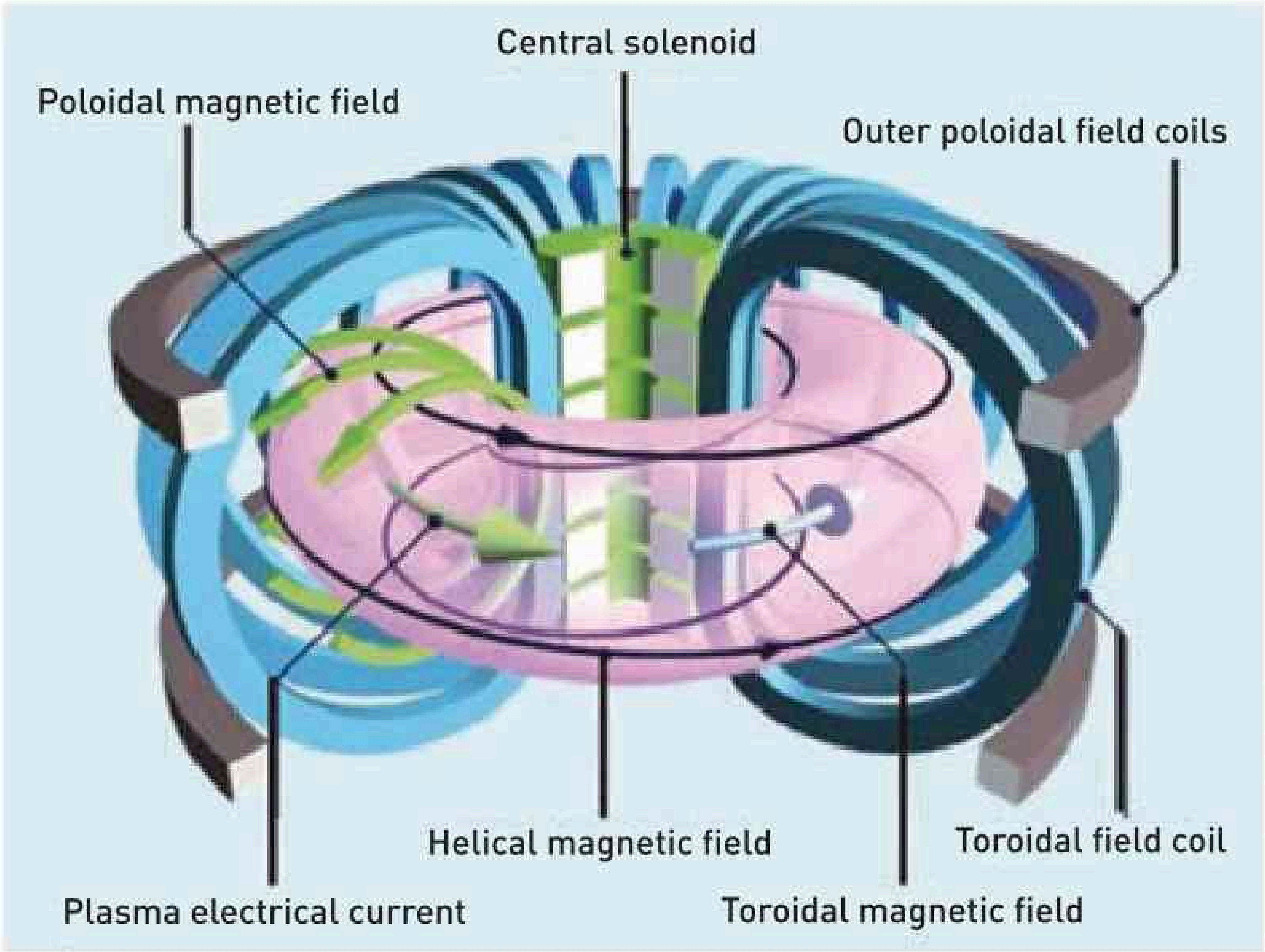
Reproducing on the earth the conditions that one obtains in a star like the sun is not easy. Fusion reactions occur when two or more atomic nuclei come close enough so that the strong nuclear attractive force between them exceeds the repulsive electrostatic force pushing them apart and results in their fusion to form heavier nuclei. For this to happen, the fuel atoms need to be given sufficient energy to overcome the electrostatic barrier, and this is achieved by heating them to very high temperatures. In fact, the temperatures required on the earth are 5-10 times the temperature at the centre of the sun. This is because of the much higher density of particles in stellar bodies more massive than the earth, such as the sun, because of their stronger gravitational pull, and this aids in bringing the fusing atoms together.

> Fusion reactions involving the lightest of nuclei, namely hydrogen and its isotopes, yield the highest amount of energy.

At the high temperatures of 100-150 million °C required for fusion to occur, the atoms are stripped of their electrons, resulting in a hot gas of floating positively charged nuclei and negatively charged free electrons in a state known as plasma. Unlike a normal gas, plasma, being charged, is electrically conductive, and its motion can be controlled by externally applying very strong magnetic fields so that the hot bubbles of charged gas are confined within a designated volume.

One of the common ways of containing and confining plasma is by using a doughnut-shaped, or torus, device called a tokamak where magnetic field coils confine plasma particles to attain the conditions necessary for fusion (Fig. 4). The plasma particles float around mostly in the centre of the torus where fusion reactions between the nuclei occur in large numbers. Tokamaks have, in fact, emerged as the leading plasma confinement concept for future fusion power plants. The reactors of both JET and ITER are basically doughnut-shaped tokamaks.

At the core of JET is the toroidal vacuum vessel where the fusion plasma is confined by means of strong magnetic fields (of about four tesla) and plasma currents (of about five million amperes). In JET's present configuration, the major and minor radii of the plasma torus are 3 metres and 0.9 m respectively, and the total plasma volume is 90 cubic metres. The plasma is heated using 4 MW power radio waves and by injecting a fast beam of hydrogen



EUROFUSION CONSORTIUM

**FIG. 4:** The basic components of a tokamak include the toroidal field coils (in blue), the central solenoid (in green) and the poloidal field coils (in grey). The total magnetic field (in black) around the torus confines the path of travel of the charged plasma particles.

atoms. A divertor at the bottom of the vacuum vessel allows escaping heat and gas to be exhausted in a controlled way.

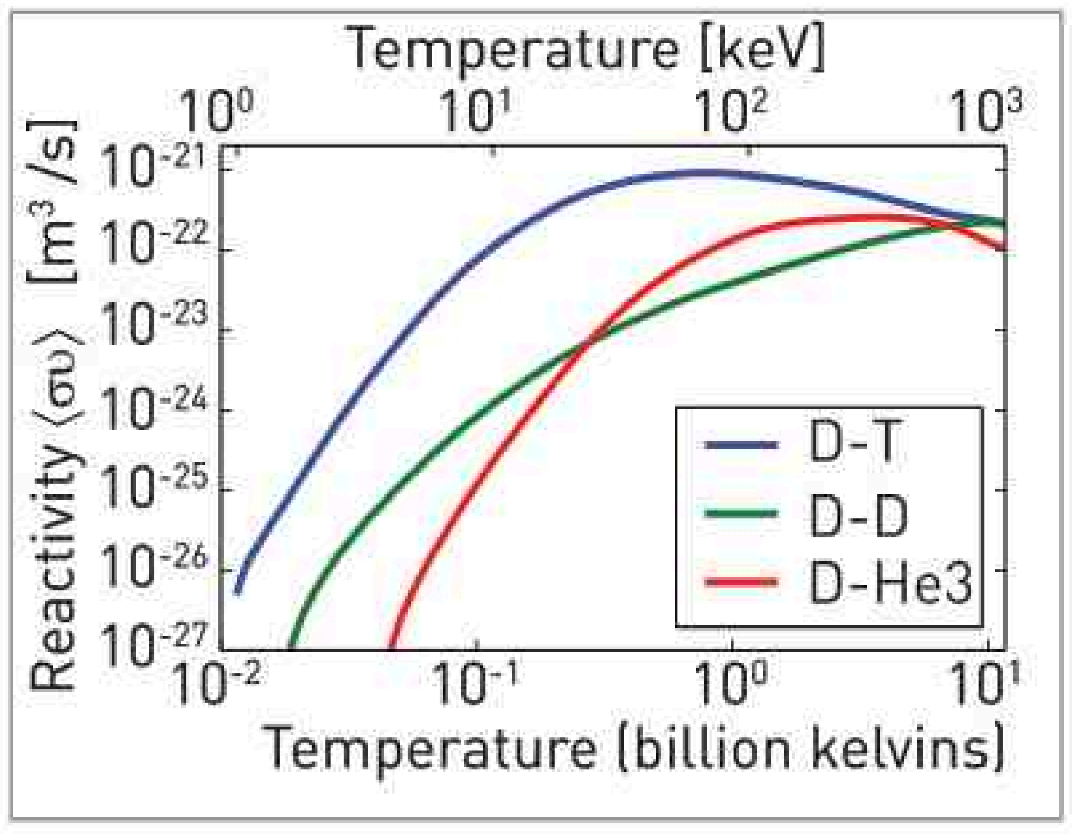
In operation since 1983, JET was originally designed to study plasma behaviour in conditions and dimensions similar to a typical large-scale fusion reactor. However, with the emergence of the idea of ITER as an international facility, JET's chief aim today, as mentioned before, is to prepare for the construction and operation of ITER by serving as a test bed for ITER technologies and plasma-operating scenarios. It is the only fusion reactor in the world that currently operates with a D-T fuel mix, the fuel that will be used in ITER as well. While at its start in 2025, ITER will operate with low-power H reactions alone, from 2035 onwards it is expected to run on an even mix of D and T. ITER's ultimate goal is to be able to achieve a Q-value of 10, producing 500 MW from 50 MW of injected thermal power to ignite the D-T plasma.

Hydrogen comes in three forms or isotopes: the natural form (H, the simplest) has a single proton as its nucleus; the heavier D has one proton and one neutron; and T, the heaviest, has a proton and two neutrons. In earlier fusion experiments, including those at JET, only atoms of H and D were used to gain insight into practical ways of testing of plasma heating and its confinement and related control systems, but they hardly produced any fusion reactions. This is because, among the different compositions of plasma using hydrogen isotopes, the probability for a fusion reaction to occur (the cross section, as it is called) is the highest in plasma that uses a D-T combination as the fuel (Fig. 5). In fact, the cross section peaks at lower energies (equivalently, lower temperatures) compared with other combinations. This is why a D-T fuel mix is the fuel of choice for a fusion reactor.

Fortunately, deuterium is commonly available. About 1 in 5,000 hydrogen atoms in seawater is deuterium. When fusion power becomes a reality, just one litre of seawater could produce as much energy as about 80 L of petrol. But to have a D-T mix as the fuel poses a challenge because tritium is rare, radioactive and unstable, decaying with a half-life of 12.3 years. In nature, therefore, tritium occurs only in trace amounts. It is, however, artificially produced as a by-product in nuclear fission reactors where the more abundant element lithium is exposed to energetic neutrons. The current world's supply, however, is just 20 kilograms. Thus, a D-T fusion reactor would also require an enriched lithium-based tritium production facility either as a part of the reactor itself (using a blanket of lithium on the inner wall of the torus) or as a separate one alongside it.

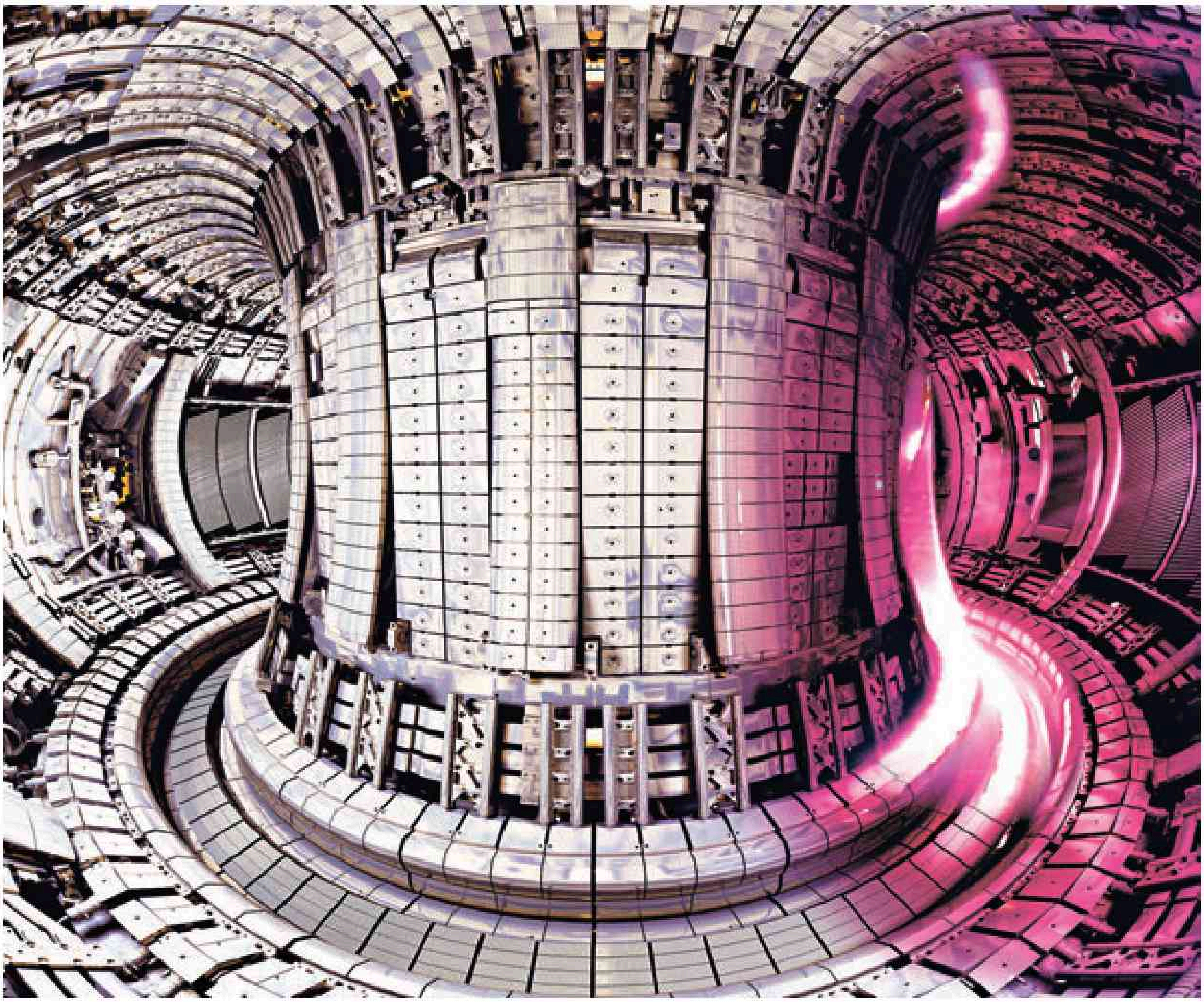
Fusion experiments at JET in the 1990s were already using D-T as the fuel. In fact, they were called the DTE1 experiments and they provided a great deal of experimental knowledge in handling tritium in tokamak reactors. The 1997 record was the culmination of a series of DTE1 experiments. The aim then was to maximise peak power. Although JET succeeded in achieving a record Q-value of 0.67, the peak lasted only for a fraction of a second.

The present JET results of the DTE2 campaign do not overturn that peak value. The Q-value attained this time around was only 0.33, but the average sustained power was more than double the 1997 level, and that too over a five-second pulse. Indeed, the aim of DTE2, which began in June 2021 with the injection of D-T fuel into the tokamak and ended with the December's record-breaking result, was not to hit peak power but to



WIKIPEDIA

**FIG. 5:** The fusion reaction rate increases rapidly with temperature until it maximises and then gradually drops off. The deuterium-tritium fusion rate peaks at a lower temperature (about 70 keV, or 800 million kelvins) and at a higher value than other reactions commonly considered for fusion energy.



EUROFUSION CONSORTIUM

**FIG. 6:** The interior of JET with the new beryllium-tungsten wall and superimposed D-T plasma.

achieve a sustained higher power over a longer period of about five seconds and to understand the behaviour of a long-lasting tritium plasma and its effect on the system hardware, which will be crucial in operating ITER.

In August last, the National Ignition Facility of the U.S. Department of Energy, which uses laser beams to ignite and control a D-T plasma, achieved its highest power output ever of 1.35 MJ, which was 70 per cent of the laser energy pumped in to ignite the fusion process; that is, a Q-value of 0.7, higher than JET's 1997 record. But the output energy pulse event was extremely short-lived, lasting just less than four billionths of a second. This really puts JET's achievement in perspective and is an indicator of progress in fusion research in the near future, especially at ITER.

## A BREAKTHROUGH

According to Fernanda Rimini, a plasma researcher at the CCFE, who was quoted in *Nature*, JET loses heat more easily than ITER, and achieving break-even was never the aim of the DTE2 run. "If engineers applied the same conditions and physics approach to ITER as to JET," she told *Nature*, "it would probably reach its goal of a Q of 10, producing ten times the energy put in." Thus, scientists regard a five-second pulse of a sustained D-T fusion with good power output as a breakthrough. Success was the result of 20 years of experimental optimisation and hardware upgrades, particularly a change in the materials used, for JET to become more ITER-like in order to conduct dedicated studies for ITER.

By far the most significant upgrade to JET was to make the reactor wall with the metals beryllium (Be) and tungsten (W) for it to be an ITER-like wall (ILW). During the DTE1 campaign in 1997, JET had an inner wall made of solid carbon. Although carbon is heat-resistant and does not melt, an H/D/T plasma in contact with a carbon surface will result in the formation of hydrocarbons and erode the wall. These hydrocarbons can get deposited as gunk in remote corners of the machine that will be hard to remove and the fuel too will end up being captured in hydrocarbons and deplete the total amount of fuel in the core, which will severely affect the per-

> The problem in harnessing energy from nuclear fusion has been in making fusion reactions happen in a controlled and sustained fashion so that the energy released can be continuously tapped.

formance of the reactor. Hence, the idea of replacing the carbon wall with a Be-W wall was to ensure much lower tritium retention in the walls. This also enables the wall to sustain larger temperatures and prevent erosion (Fig. 6). Together with upgraded heating power, this ILW enabled scientists to develop plasma scenarios that resembled as closely as possible those planned for ITER.

But running JET with ILW led to surprising discoveries, according to Guy Matthews, the ILW project leader at JET. “Even though it was only the tokamak wall that [had] changed, the physics of the plasma itself changed quite a lot. Nobody had expected that. For instance, it became harder to achieve high plasma temperatures, and JET physicists had to develop new ways to achieve high fusion performance,” he said.

D-T fusion reactions produce neutrons at a much greater rate than with D (or H) atoms alone. While greater neutron generation does mean increased energy output, since neutrons have no charge, they cannot be contained by the magnetic field. This means they would hit against the walls of the reactor, causing damage. Renovation of the machine, particularly in terms of material used inside the reactor, was thus necessary to prepare it for the much heavier neutron bombardment and much greater heat. Although the superheated plasma is mostly contained within a magnetic field, the surrounding reactor material will still be subject to huge temperatures. At ITER, the hottest part of the machine would reach around 1,300 °C.

So the other major difference from the 1997 experiments was refitting the inside of JET’s reactor with materials that matched ITER’s design so that the effects of heat and neutron bombardment and removal of impurities from the plasma could be studied. But these new materials can affect the plasma itself, and understanding how they interacted with the fusion process was also an essential part of the run-up to the DTE2 campaign.

In the build-up to the DTE2 campaign, two other important issues were studied: one, the impact of the so-called “isotope effect” and, two, how to increase the fusion energy output by continued heating of the plasma with the product of the D-T fusion reactions, namely, the 3.5 million electronvolt helium nuclei, or alpha particles (Fig. 1). This is the ignition concept where the plasma burning is sustained without external heating depending on the ability of the reactor to confine the alpha particles as well in the torus.

The isotope effect was studied in 2020 to answer the following question: what would be the effect of changing the average atomic mass of the plasma? The average atomic mass of a full hydrogen plasma would be 1, the atomic weight of hydrogen. Similarly, a full D plasma will have an average atomic mass of 2, and a full T plasma will have an average atomic mass of 3. Since, for a plasma in transport, the isotope composition can have a strong effect on various processes in the plasma such as the heat, and particle and momentum confinement, it was necessary to understand or predict how they would vary for a 50:50 D-T plasma, which will have an average atomic mass of 2.5. After campaigns involving full H plasma and full D plasma, in December 2020, JET scientists began their experiments with full T plasma.

“We did this T-T campaign for two reasons,” said Joëlle Mailloux, a UKAEA nuclear physicist in a release issued on February 14, “one, to prepare for the D-T campaign; and two, to understand the physics of tritium in the reactor better.” One of the main issues in fusion is core confinement: how well can you make magnets hold a plasma with temperatures of 150 million °C. Once you achieve that with an H plasma, how do you translate elements of the technique evolved to T, which is three times heavier than H?

With D-T plasma, the fusion product helium nuclei also need to be kept track of. According to theory, these should affect the magnetic confinement owing to electromagnetic effects. According to Joëlle Mailloux, even while the whole effort is to fuse D and T, in experiments, it is difficult to disentangle which effect is which. In pure tritium plasma, there will be some T-T fusions, but since it does not produce any alpha particles, it lets you do just that, she said.

“We had some unexpected results and adapted procedures and experiments, but no big physics surprises, which is very encouraging,” Joëlle Mailloux said. “And although a full analysis of the results will take months to years to complete, the first lessons of the TT-campaign are already incorporated in the DTE2-campaign that just concluded.” And indeed, as its results show, the campaign was concluded with remarkable success.

The T-T studies and the record-smashing D-T fusion results may be the final experiments at JET. EUROfusion decided last year to end JET’s operations by 2023 end, and the UKAEA has stated that it plans to decommission the experiment. JET began in 1983 and has ended its four-decade-long experimental campaign in fusion research with remarkable results. These have laid the foundation for the large-scale production of fusion energy using the next-generation fusion reactors, and with that a path towards a sustainable and clean energy future may have emerged. ☐

# Shooting the messenger

Being a journalist in Jammu and Kashmir has always been fraught with dangers, but after August 5, 2019, intimidation and harassment of individual scribes who have refused to compromise on their journalistic independence have become the order of the day. BY **ANANDO BHAKTO**

JAMMU AND KASHMIR has never been a hassle-free territory for journalists, but the state's apparatus of repression has only become more brazen in the post August 5, 2019, era, when it was bifurcated, downgraded into a Union Territory and stripped of its special status. Manhandling of journalists, frequent summons to police stations, slapping of anti-terror laws against them and a few arrests, too, have become the order of the day.

The raging question of media freedom has once again come into prominence after a series of assaults on the media fraternity. The year began with a controversial takeover of the Kashmir Press Club. As per media reports, Srinagar's Additional District Magistrate reportedly issued an order putting on hold the "re-registration" clearance given by the Registrar of Societies and Firms in Jammu and Kashmir to the Press Club on December 29, 2021. The move came just as the Press Club management decided to go ahead with elections to elect its office bearers.

Almost simultaneously, a section of mediapersons took over the management of the club stating that the previous body's term had ended in July 2021. At least nine journalists' bodies opposed the development, with many of them describing it, on social media, as an "armed takeover". As the press fraternity appeared divided, the government returned to the Estates Department the premises given to the media fraternity for the Press Club, thus ensuring that it virtually ceased to exist. The administration argued that because of the "unpleasant turn" of events involving two warring groups using the banner of the Kashmir Press Club it became imperative to withhold the premises.

S. IRFAN/PTI

**MEDIA PERSONNEL** assemble outside the Kashmir Press Club building after the Jammu and Kashmir government took back the premises, in Srinagar on January 17.

In February, the harassment of individual journalists continued, and a summons was sent to *The Kashmir Walla* editor Fahad Shah. He was summoned on February 4 for allegedly "glorifying terrorist activities" and "inciting the public" and has not been released yet. On February 14, a memorandum signed by over 50 journalists and individuals/organisations working in the areas of press freedom and human rights was submitted to Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, exhorting him to intervene and ensure the early release of Fahad Shah.

The memorandum underlined how any reporting critical of the region was being branded as criminal: "[Fahad Shah's] reporting on events in Jammu and Kashmir is a public

DAR YASIN/AP

**FAHAD SHAH,** right, editor-in-chief of *The Kashmir Walla*, in the newsroom at his office in Srinagar on January 21. On February 4, he was summoned by the police for allegedly "glorifying terrorist activities" and "inciting the public" and has not been released yet.

service, not a crime, and should be protected under Indian law." It also pleaded for the Lieutenant Governor's attention on other cases of journalists being put behind bars under stringent anti-terror laws. "We also urge you to arrange the immediate release of other detained Kashmiri journalists—Sajad Gul, Aasif Sultan and Manan Gular Dar—all of whom, like Shah, have been jailed under anti-terror or preventative detention laws in apparent retaliation for their work," the memorandum said.

Fahad Shah had been the target of the police earlier as well for reporting candidly on encounters and often highlighting the high-handedness of the police or the Army. In fact, Fahad Shah's experiences in the aftermath of August 5, 2019, capture the magnitude of the price he has had to pay for questioning the authorities. From an evidently motivated first information report (FIR) carrying attempt-to-murder charges to a spate of formal and informal summons and, in one instance, an "abduction" by the police, Fahad Shah alleged that the people in power have tried everything to throttle the defiant tone of his magazine.

It was in May 2020 that *The Kashmir Walla*'s video story of an encounter in Nawakadal in Srinagar riled the authorities. The video showed houses being burned down, with fire raging all over, and women of the neighbourhood wailing during the encounter in which Junaid Sehrai, an elusive, wanted Hizbul Mujahideen militant, was killed. Soon thereafter, Fahad Shah was twice called by the authorities for what he described as "intense lecturing on how journalism ought to be". In an earlier interaction with this reporter, he shared details of the frequent ordeals he underwent: "There would be four-five senior officials present in a room; while one did all the talking, the others stared, as though to inject a sense of foreboding in me. The accusations were routine, that we focussed only on violence and excluded coverage of their 'development work'."

In October 2020, while Fahad Shah was returning from Punjab to Srinagar by road, the police stopped his car outside the Jawahar tunnel, searched it, interrogated him and the photographer who was accompanying him, and pressured the two to sit in a police van. In February 2021, when Fahad Shah talked to *Frontline* about the incident, he said: "It was an abduction. They took away my cell phone, they did not allow me to contact my lawyer or my family, and I was so scared that they might kill me without leaving a trace." He was later released.

What has been a disturbing trend in Kashmir is the somewhat abysmal submission of the local press to the administration's diktat. The general impression is that many news articles critical of the government are beginning to "disappear" from the online archives of newspapers. The intimidation and harassment of individual scribes who have refused to compromise on their journalistic independence lays bare the government's intent.

Fahad Shah was not the only person to be summoned in February 2022. As per a news article published in *Daily Excelsior*, a Jammu-based English daily, a well-known scribe and TV commentator was also summoned. Otherwise known for posting fiery critical comments

NISSAR AHMAD

**PEOPLE DOUSE FLAMES** on May 19, 2020, in the Nawakadal area of Srinagar, which was the location of an encounter. *The Kashmir Walla*'s video story of this incident riled the authorities. The video showed houses being burned down, with fire raging all over, and women of the neighbourhood wailing during the encounter in which Junaid Sehrai, an elusive, wanted Hizbul Mujahideen militant, was killed.

about the government's excesses in the Kashmir valley, the journalist in question has gone into hibernation and disappeared from social media.

### CONTROVERSIAL MEDIA POLICY

The government's bid to control the media in Kashmir was apparent as early as May 2020, when it came out with a controversial Media Policy. The 53-page document enunciated various dos and don'ts for mediapersons. It enables the government to influence news content by conferring on it the power to decide what constitutes "fake, anti-national or unethical" news. Under this policy, the Department of Information and Public Relations (DIPR) can monitor the media and initiate action against an individual or an organisation for violation of its guidelines. The policy says: "Any individual or group indulging in fake news, unethical or anti-national activities or in plagiarism shall be de-empanelled, besides being proceeded against under law."

The Media Policy also introduces a set of new stipulations on advertisements: " ... DIPR will not release advertisements to such newspapers, publications and journals which incite or tend to incite communal passions, preach violence, violate broad norms of public decency or carry out any acts or propagate any information prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India." By 2022, the impact of these coercive stipulations is there for everybody to see, with a large section of the local press keeping mum about the government's excesses.

Among other incidents of harassment of journalists, the Jammu and Kashmir Cyber Police invoked the dreaded Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act against two Kashmiri journalists, Gowhar Geelani and Masrat Zahra, in April 2020 even as the country and the world battled the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the past one year, the police have been summoning various journalists to police stations; more often than not these are purely arbitrary exercises with no legal protocols being followed. Several Kashmiri journalists who reached out to *Frontline* in the past few months said they had received calls from the Criminal Investigation Department and, in several instances, were asked to fill up forms giving details about their assets, bank accounts and kin. *Frontline* has a copy of the questionnaire. It requires journalists to declare whether they have any political allegiance, whether FIRs have been filed against them and whether they have been convicted in any case and whether they have relatives or acquaintances living in Pakistan. The questionnaire also requires them to draft a note on their "present and past activities".

Although it is impossible to gather documentary evidence about what is transpiring in Kashmir given its reputation as a black box when it comes to any security-related information, this reporter, through his sources, has compiled a list of more than 30 journalists who were either summoned to various police stations or received calls for background checks. At least four well-known journalists embedded with national dailies and weeklies were summoned to police stations. Ostensibly, this was an investigation into stories they had done, but essentially, it was about sounding a note of warning.

There are multiple instances of the authorities manhandling scribes. Auqib Javeed, Mudasir Qadri, Junaid Rafiq, Azaan Javed are among those who were thrashed in the line of duty. Javeed's case was particularly terrorising. In September 2020, the reporter, who works with a Srinagar-based English daily, was slapped by a masked man inside a police station in Srinagar. Before that, Javeed had done a story alleging that the cyber branch of the Jammu and Kashmir Police was intimidating Twitter users who posted opinions critical of the police. Around the same time, the Kashmiri reporters Fayaz Ahmad, Mudasir Qadri and Junaid Rafiq were beaten up in south Kashmir while they were in the field. ☐

COLUMN

ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR

# Markets at turning point

**High inflation in advanced economies is forcing central banks to go back on their unconventional monetary policies. It also spells trouble for emerging markets such as India, since foreign financial investors are likely to exit either because of rising capital costs or the need to cover losses at home.**

THE week starting February 13 began with mayhem in India's stock markets, with the Sensex falling by close to 1,750 points. While some analysts attributed the fall to the standoff between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation over Ukraine, there are longer-term issues involved—not the least of them is the 40-year high that inflation in the United States has touched, with the annual rate in excess of 7 per cent for two months running.

Foreign institutional investors, who have, over two decades, overwhelmingly determined the direction of the movement of stock prices in India and influenced the behaviour of domestic institutional and retail investors, are withdrawing from Indian markets. This is because, besides directly troubling financial investors by eroding the real value of financial assets, the high and even accelerating inflation rates in advanced economies are forcing Central banks to go back on the unconventional monetary policies—involving near-zero interest rates and massive liquidity injection—they have pursued for well over a decade now.

The Federal Reserve has decided to halt its "quantitative easing" programme under which it had bought large volumes of bonds every month from the market with the intent of pouring liquidity into the system. It has also signalled that it will resort to more than one significant increase in interest rates over the coming year.

The adoption of a tighter monetary stance and higher interest rates will bring to an end the era of easy and cheap money which fuelled asset price inflation in financial markets even when real economic growth remained subdued in the years following the 2008 crisis. The consequences are visible in advanced country bond markets, with a sell-out of two-year U.S. government bonds pushing yields to above 1.6 per cent, as compared with levels of just 0.4 per cent in November. The Standard & Poor's 500 index for U.S. stocks is also down by more than 6 per cent in the first month-and-a-half of this year.

Inflation, and the monetary response to it, is also encouraging investors to pull back on investments in emerging markets and rebalance their global portfolios. The volatility in India's stock markets is clearly driven by such actions and the knock-on effects they have on domestic investors. As the cost of capital rises and net returns are squeezed, carry trades—or the practice of taking on cheap dollar debt to invest in emerging markets where returns are high—seem less attractive. And with the likelihood of depreciation of currencies in emerging market currencies in the current environment, the risks associated with such investments are rising.

The problem is that the disruption in markets will only intensify. This is because the uncertainties and downside risks in developed-country markets, from where the destabilising winds blow into emerging markets like India, are substantial and not fully understood. To start with, while there is agreement that the unwinding of unconventional monetary policies will disrupt markets, there is lack of clarity on how severe, widespread and long-lasting that impact would be.

But there is a growing realisation that markets have for too long been provided loads of cheap money that financed speculative investments and inflated prices in asset markets. Asset prices may have risen partly because some investors were convinced that corporate profits that ruled high, facilitated by state policy, would remain high for quite some time into the future. But the main reason was that most investors believed that interest rates would remain low and liquidity would be abundant, and that, like them, many others would borrow and invest to keep markets buoyant.

As it becomes clear that such belief is unwarranted, markets are bound to unwind dramatically with ripple effects that can be quite damaging. It was this fear that kept unconventional monetary policies in place for long. The pandemic and the periodic halts in economic activity that accompanied it provided additional reasons for extending that regime. How much that has inflated markets beyond levels from which they can be safely unwound is unknown, adding to the uncertainties that threaten to roil markets.

Since the early 1980s, advanced economies, especially the U.S., have been through the period identified as the Great Moderation when inflation was consistently low. This lulled policymakers into believing that capitalism had put behind it the Great Inflation, seen in the years between 1965 and 1980. As a result, the current inflation, which was initially expected to be transitory, is not seen as long-lasting, and is attributed to likely-to-be-short-lived "exogenous" factors such as rising oil and commodity prices rather than the inner dynamics of capitalist societies. So, risking some inflation, over not too long a period, appears to many policymakers as a better bet than embracing the dangers potentially associated with the unwinding of cheap money policies.

This results in much uncertainty about how soon and how far the Fed would go in unwinding its unconventional monetary stance. But the proclivity to postpone coming to terms with inflation delays and prolongs the portfolio adjustment needed to facilitate a soft landing. It will also force Central banks to tighten monetary policy more sharply in the coming months with potential unintended consequences.

It is precisely when inflation is rearing its head that developed-country governments, rudely awakened by Chinese competition and the COVID pandemic, are coming to terms with the consequences of the conservatism that characterised their fiscal policies for the last four decades. In the U.S., this has meant that under the Joe Biden administration, federal spending is being hiked hugely, even if not to the extent that the Democrats would have liked. Although this is the way to go with large unutilised capacities in most economies, markets fear that such spending will worsen the inflationary spiral and its consequences for market "performance". Repeated references to supply-side bottlenecks and supply chain disruptions reflect the fear that increases in demand driven by enhanced state spending will run into a wall and drive up prices. U.S. growth, however strong it may or may not have been, has ridden on financial bubbles, with asset price increases and easy credit encouraging consumption. Now, growth has slowed for a host of reasons. If the financial buoyancy that breeds confidence and encourages consumption were also to give way, a recession could accompany a financial meltdown.

## TROUBLE FOR INDIA

These uncertainties are bound to make the adjustment that is inevitable also unpredictable in terms of nature and intensity. This can spell trouble for emerging markets such as India. Foreign financial investors are likely to book profits and exit either because of rising capital costs or the need to cover losses at home. Domestic financial investors who were attracted by the returns ensured by foreign financial flows into shallow and thin markets, where stocks of a few firms are actively traded and the share of free floating stocks of those firms available for trading are also limited, will retreat. This will intensify market turmoil and foreign capital exit.

But this is not the main threat. That will come from the impact that the exit of foreign capital will have on the exchange rate. During the taper tantrum of 2013, the rupee came under pressure soon after the then Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke announced that the central bank was contemplating tapering out its bond purchases. That did not happen, and the Reserve Bank of India managed, through unconventional means, to stabilise the rupee. If there is an actual exit of capital, that may be difficult to ensure, and it can lead to other repercussions.

During the years of cheap money, when interest rates abroad ruled much below domestic rates in India, many corporate groups borrowed heavily in global markets. If the rupee depreciates, the rupee cost of servicing that foreign debt can spike, eroding profits and damaging balance sheets of domestic firms, and even triggering bankruptcy. How far this will go is unclear, since there is so much that is not known about the way the global economy will unwind.

The current and past governments that ruled India cannot absolve themselves of responsibility of whatever ensues by attributing those outcomes to external forces outside the control of the domestic state. If India is vulnerable to developments abroad, it is because these government have, by opting for financial liberalisation and openness, integrated domestic and foreign markets. The presumption implicit in that choice of policy regime is that the government has in its hands instruments with which it can either moderate exposure to volatilities transmitted from abroad or manage the consequence of such volatility. Neither of that is necessarily true. ☐

# Not so neat

The Tamil Nadu Governor sends back a Bill seeking exemption for the State from NEET, triggering a political tussle and questions of constitutional propriety. BY **R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN**

EXACTLY a week after Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi sent back to the State government a Bill passed by the Legislative Assembly exempting the State from the National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test (NEET), the House re-adopted the Bill unanimously and sent it back to him, demanding that he forward it to the President for consent.

The Governor had sent back the Bill on February 1 for the Assembly's reconsideration. On February 8, a representative of the Tamil Nadu government handed over to the Raj Bhavan the re-adopted Bill earlier on that day.

This was the third time that the Tamil Nadu government had unanimously passed such a Bill. In the first instance, in February 2017, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) government adopted a a similar Bill, but the President declined to give his assent to it. After the alliance led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was voted to power in May 2021, the Assembly passed a Bill on September 13, 2021. The Governor took 142 days to study the Bill ("Medical education: A case against NEET", *Frontline*, October 22, 2021).

After the Assembly re-adopted the Bill, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin said: "At least now I expect that he [Governor] will do his duty. I hope that the Governor will respect the sentiments of the people of Tamil Nadu and act in the best interests of the students of Tamil Nadu by sending the NEET exemption Bill to the President without delay."

At the time of going to the press, the Governor had not publicly stated if he would discharge his constitutional obligations and convey the Bill to the President, as demanded by all political parties except the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The BJP chose to stage a walkout ahead of the discussion on the Bill. Since the BJP members were not present in the House at the time of voting, M. Appavu, the Speaker, declared that the Bill passed unanimously.

The AIADMK, the main opposition party, supported the Bill.

The chain of events began after the Governor returned the Bill. The government, reacting swiftly, on February 4 called for a meeting of leaders of political parties represented in the State legislature to discuss the issue on February 5. The BJP, which supports NEET, and the AIADMK refused to attend the meeting. After the meeting ended, the government announced that a special session of the Assembly would be convened on February 8 to discuss the Governor's action and re-adopt the Bill.

### 'STRANGE DECISION'

The Governor did not merely return the Bill but made it a point to issue a press release on the reasons for his decision, which many long-time MLAs found strange.

R.N. Ravi, a former Indian Police Service officer who has thrown his weight with the BJP, termed as "utterly unconvincing" the findings of the A.K. Rajan Committee, which was constituted by the government in June 2021 to study the impact of NEET on students from

THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

**CHIEF MINISTER** M.K. Stalin speaking in the Tamil Nadu Assembly when it met in a special session on February 8 to re-adopt the NEET exemption Bill.

socially backward classes, and said that the committee's report had "several unsubstantiated sweeping assumptions".

A Raj Bhavan press release dated February 3 said that the Governor, "after a detailed study ... is of the opinion that the Bill is against the interests of students, especially the rural and economically poor students of the State".

Hence, it said, the Governor had returned the Bill to the Speaker of the Assembly on February 1, 2022, "giving detailed reasons, for its reconsideration by the House". State government officials pointed out that this was not the only Bill the Governor had been sitting on.

A copy of the Governor's letter was given to the MLAs so that they could study his response. A few newspapers and social media handles, including those belonging to prominent right-wingers, published the Governor's explanation. The Speaker expressed his displeasure that a privileged communication was made available to all in the public domain but stopped short of asking for legal action against those who shared it in the public domain.

In his letter, the Governor said that it was "obvious" that the High-Level [A.K. Rajan] Committee's report was the basis of the Bill and listed some of its "unsubstantiated sweeping assumptions".

He said: "The report argues against NEET on the ground that it is against social justice as it allegedly favours the rich students who take advantage of coaching which the poor cannot afford." He added: "It [the report] totally ignores the fact that coaching skews the State Board results also."

Disregarding the contents of the A.K. Rajan Committee report, he concluded: "It is apparent from the above facts that the report merely reflects the jaundiced view of the High-Level Committee."

A day after his letter became public knowledge, the Governor's office hastened to add that he meant "no disrespect" to Justice (retd) Rajan.

In his Assembly speech, Stalin responded to each of the Governor's statements. He said: "NEET is not a system established by the Constitution.... The Medical Council of India mandated the creation of NEET." He added that the DMK had opposed it in 2010.

M. PERIASAMY

**GOVERNOR** R.N. Ravi.

In a case in the Supreme Court, NEET was declared unconstitutional on July 18, 2013. After the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power in 2014, a private training institute approached the court and swiftly got an order recalling the judgment. The NDA government lost no time in rolling out NEET through an ordinance on April 11, 2016.

### CHIEF MINISTER'S RESPONSE

Stating that private training institutions benefited from NEET, Stalin said: "The NEET exemption bill is being introduced for the benefit of those who cannot afford to pay so much for the coaching. NEET is an impediment to the entitlement of the poor and needy children to education. A barrier in the form of NEET has been erected in their dream of becoming doctors." He also said that NEET was not "a holy cow" and added: "It attempts to marginalise students from low-income families in the guise of merit." Stating that NEET was inherently discriminatory, he said that it had to be done away with in the interest of upholding the Constitution and in the interest of social justice.

Later, he said on Twitter: "Our fight is not to seek exclusive concession for Tamil Nadu, but to ensure a level playing field for the marginalised and underprivileged who are chased away by the coaching-driven, discriminatory NEET. Will strive to strengthen federalism in India."

### DISCUSSION ON BILL

During the Assembly discussion on the Bill, K. Selvaperunthagai, the Congress Legislative Party leader, said that NEET benefited coaching institutions and impersonators who appeared for others in the test. He named a student who was arrested for impersonation and questioned the very basis of the examination.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) demanded that the Centre recall the Governor and urged the State government to move a Bill to that effect. Nagai Maali, a CPI(M) MLA, said: "This act of the Governor against the Constitution. This is against the interests of the students, Tamil Nadu, and against the concept of federalism."

T. Velmurugan, an MLA from the Tamizhaga Vazhvurimai Katchi, said that it was clear that rich students benefited from NEET because only those who could attend tuition classes paying very high fees, as much as Rs.5 lakh, were able to get admission into medical courses.

AIADMK leader C. Vijayabhaskar, who was Health Minister when the AIADMK government adopted a NEET exemption Bill, cautioned the government, stating that it must carefully examine the Bill because it had already been rejected twice. Edappadi K. Palaniswami, Leader of the Opposition, said that the AIADMK would support any effort of the government to get the exemption. The path that the State government intends to take is very clear. Before it can approach the Supreme Court with facts and figures, it has to exhaust all due processes available by way of legislative means.

Even as this battle goes on, with the passage of each year, the State government gets additional ammunition to fire anti-NEET salvos.

For now, there is no doubt that the DMK has a long road ahead in its fight against NEET. With the Central government in no mood to pay heed to demands from any opposition-ruled State, the fight is only going to get tougher.

# Women on the warpath

Seventy per cent of Haryana's anganwadi workers and helpers have been on an indefinite strike for two months demanding that the government honour its promise to increase their wages. And the government is making every effort to break the strike.

BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

ON February 15, nearly 40,000 young, middle-aged and elderly women marched towards the Chief Minister City (or CM City) in Karnal, Haryana, launching the second phase of a protest that began two months ago. These workers and helpers of anganwadis under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)—the Central government's supplementary nutrition scheme for children under six, adolescent girls, and pregnant and lactating mothers—had just one demand: that Chief Minister M.L. Khattar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi keep their promises regarding their wages.

For years, anganwadi workers and helpers, who are mostly from lower-income and lower and backward caste groups, have been receiving a subsistence honorarium with no social security or retirement benefits even though the scheme rests entirely on their shoulders. The honorarium had been raised from time to time only after a few Central trade unions organised them. These women now constitute a formidable force across the country among workers in the unorganised sector.

The women are in the process of making history in Haryana just as farmers protesting against the controversial farm laws did in 2020-21. Braving the bitter north Indian winter, thousands of them have been on strike, or a *Taala Bandh hartal* in local parlance, for more than two months since December 8 demanding that the Bharatiya Janata Party government implement the assurances Khattar made in the Assembly in March 2018 regarding their emoluments and working conditions.

Khattar made the assurance after anganwadi workers and helpers went on a month-long strike that year demanding a long-overdue raise in the honorarium.To assuage the strikers, the Chief Minister announced in the Assembly that they would be categorised as skilled and unskilled workers and paid wages according to the rates prevalent for those categories in the State. He also stated that they would get a Dearness Allowance (D.A.), and that Haryana would be the first State to do so. Accordingly, the honorarium was increased by Rs.3,000 for workers and Rs.1,500 for helpers. Later that year, in September 2018, Prime Minister Modi announced in his Mann Ki Baat address to the nation that the honorarium for ICDS workers and helpers across the country would be increased by Rs.1,500 and Rs.750, respectively.

The month-long strike in 2018 was called off after the government's offer of an increase in honorarium and the provision for D.A., which would have ensured a decent wage indexed to inflation. The government released money for two instalments of D.A., but discontinued it arbitrarily after 2019. The promise of categorising anganwadi workers and

helpers as unskilled and skilled workers was put into cold storage. And the Prime Minister's announcement remained on paper.

After waiting for three years, from 2018 to 2021, the women decided to go on a State-wide strike accusing the government of reneging on its promise. It was an irony that, unlike employees in the organised sector where salaries are indexed to inflation, the honorariums for anganwadi workers and helpers were hiked only when these women took to the streets for their legitimate rights.

The ongoing strike is unprecedented, as is the government's response. Ever since it began, the services of 100 workers and helpers have been terminated and 400 strikers have first information reports (FIR) filed against them. But the women are unfazed. Shakuntala, general secretary of the All India Federation of Anganwadi Workers and Helpers (Haryana), one of the two unions leading the strike, said: "We cannot go back. The government is not implementing its own announcement. It cannot take us for granted. Three years ago it promised to increase our honorarium and place us in the category of skilled and unskilled workers. We waited from 2018 to 2021. We submitted memorandums and organised small protests to remind the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister of their promises. Now M.L. Khattar says he made those assurances in passing. What does that mean? How can an elected head of state talk like this? His words have no credibility. Neither does the Prime Minister's Mann Ki Baat declaration mean anything. His Mann Ki Baat remained in his *mann* [mind] only."

Shakuntala, who joined the ICDS in 2011, is among the dismissed workers. "We are really not bothered about the termination of our services or even the FIRs. The women are ready to sit on an indefinite protest if that is what will make the government relent," said Shakuntala, whose union is affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The strike is led by two State-level federations, one affiliated with the CITU and the other with the All India United Trade Union Centre (AIUTUC).

## THE TALKS THAT FAILED

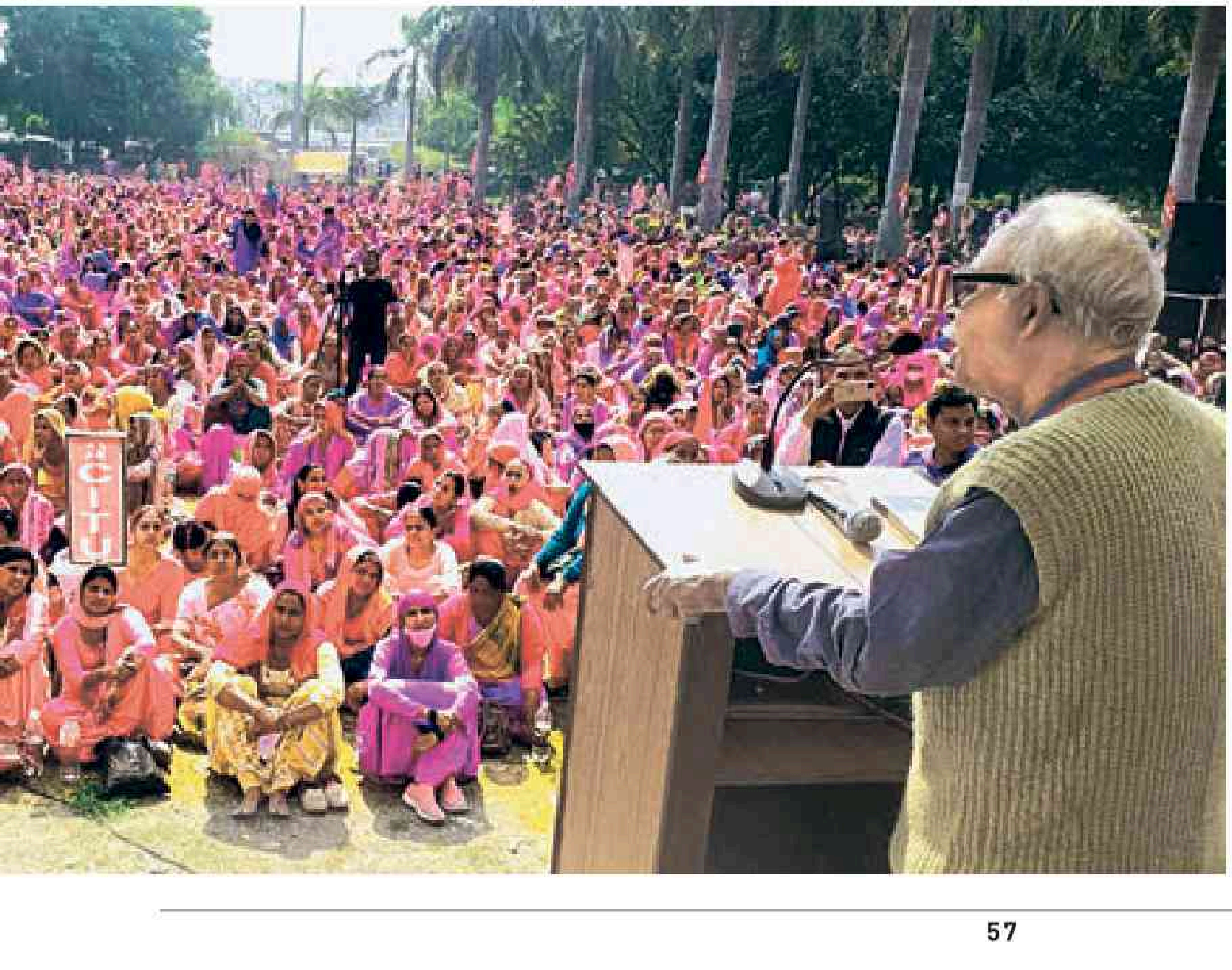
When it became clear that the government had no intention of keeping its promises, three of the five unions in the State got together in December 2021 and formed a committee. They held six rounds of talks, five with department officials and one with the Chief Minister on December 29. Shakuntala said the representatives of all the five unions met the government representatives.

However, Shakuntala told *Frontline,* representatives of the union affiliated with the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the labour wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, began praising the government's efforts even before the charter of demands was handed over to the Chief Minister. She said she objected to this. The BMS has largely been silent on issues, such as consolidating all labour laws into four labour codes in the name of doing ease of business, simplifying compliance standards for industry, implementing fixed-term employment, or selling profit-making public sector units, which have been raised by the other Central trade unions. The BMS has stayed away from the agitation.

In the December 29 meeting, when the unions reminded the Chief Minister of his promise, the latter told them that he had made the announcement in a fit of enthusiasm but could not implement it. Said Shakuntala: "He told us that his government was already paying us too much and that the State government ranked number one in giving benefits. We told him that Haryana was ranked fifth and not number one." Incidentally, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Telangana gave higher honorariums to anganwadi workers and helpers than Haryana did.

The government renotified a 2016 decision to provide a travel allowance to the anganwadi staff for their attendance at select meetings. It also stated that it would revise the rents of ICDS centres, for which a notification had already been issued. The rent, Shakuntala said, was only a pittance.

In Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, anganwadi workers and helpers are given promotions based on seniority. When the unions told the



PHOTOGRAPHS: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**TAPAN SEN,** general secretary, Centre of Indian Trade Unions, addressing the protesting workers at Karnal.

Chief Minister about the promotion opportunities in Punjab, they were advised to go to that State. In Haryana, Shakuntala said, workers and helpers were expected to clear examinations to get promotions.

The government agreed to pay an ex gratia amount of Rs.2 lakh to anganwadi workers and helpers in the event of an accidental death, but not if the death was from natural causes. "Accredited Social Health Activists [ASHA] get an ex gratia amount of Rs.3 lakh in deaths from natural causes, but we would be given Rs.2 lakh, and only if the death was caused by an accident. How is it fair?" said Shakuntala.

According to the government, since it had already increased the honorarium in March 2018 it made no sense to increase it again after the Prime Minister's announcement. "Does this mean that the Chief Minister knew that the Prime Minister was going to make an announcement in September 2018?" she asked.

> Of the 52,000 anganwadi workers and helpers in the State, 40,000 are on strike.

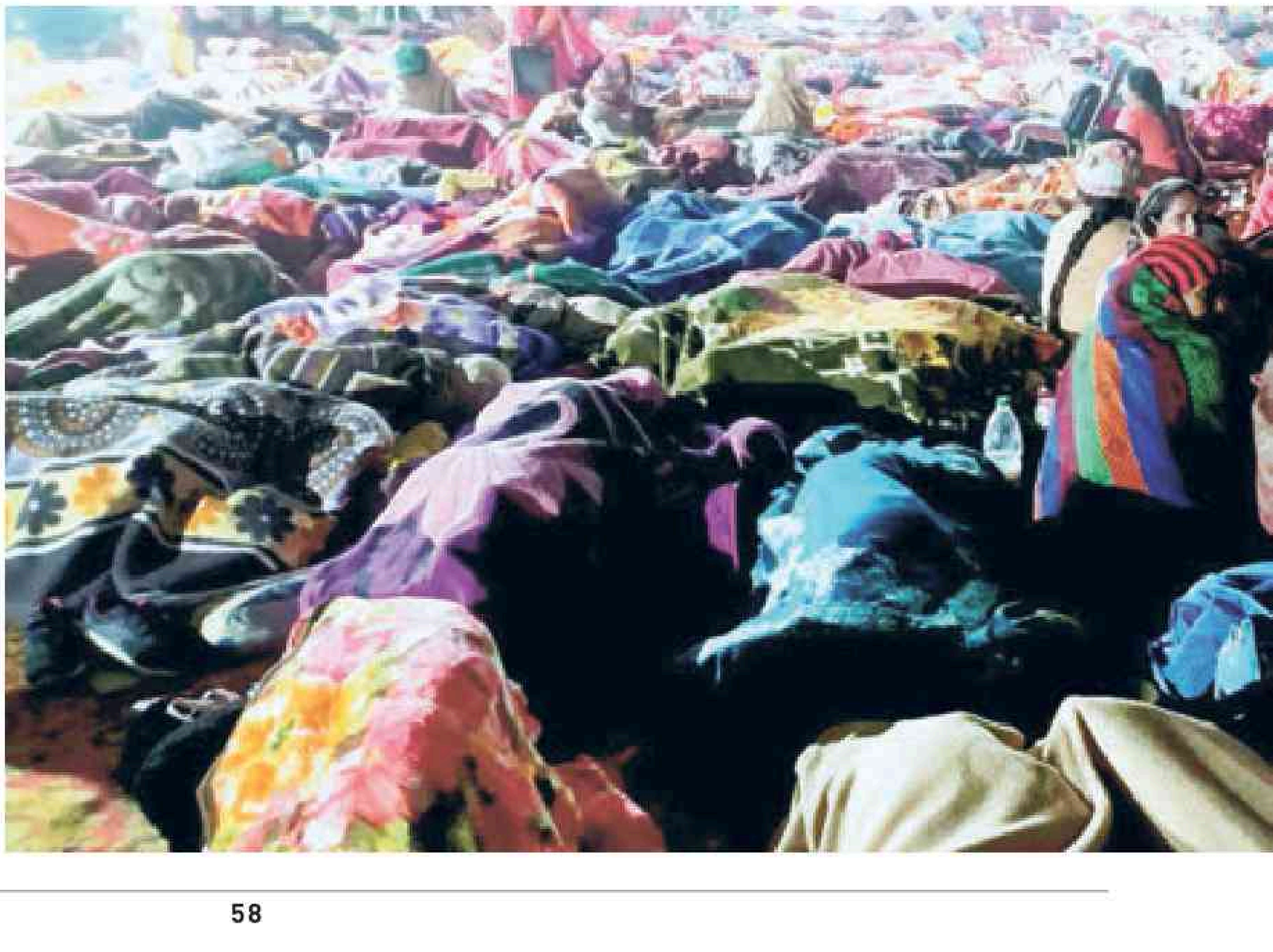
After the December 29 meeting, the government also announced its intent to give a one-time pension of Rs.1 lakh to workers upon their retirement at the age of 65 and Rs.50,000 to helpers. But this also was not unique; in some States, the pensions ranged from Rs.3 lakh to Rs.5 lakh.

### DETERMINED TO WIN

Anganwadi workers and helpers *Frontline* spoke to said that the protest was unprecedented in more ways than one. Never before had any government expended so much energy on breaking a strike and that too by women. Government officials, they said, were pressuring the families of strikers through influential people. ASHA workers and supervisors have been asked to obtain information of the spouses of the striking women, especially if they were employed with the government. Some of the spouses were lured with promotions if they persuaded their wives to end the strike and return to work. "When women have not feared terminations of service and FIRs, the pressure from their families is also not going to affect their morale. Of the 52,000 workers and helpers in the State, 40,000 are on strike which is close to 70 per cent," said Suman, an anganwadi worker.

Said Sunita, the district president of the CITU-backed union in Charkhi Dadri: "We are not asking for anything new. Just that the old demands be implemented. We get Rs.11,811 as a monthly honorarium. How can we run our households with

**THE ONGOING STRIKE** is unprecedented, as is the government's response.



that? Even a daily wager gets Rs.450 a day."

She said even though the government had declared them front-line warriors in the battle against COVID-19, they were not given any protective equipment, gloves, sanitisers or masks. She said: "If there is 100 per cent vaccination today, it is because we have motivated people to get vaccinated. During COVID, they did not give us anything. Regular government employees refused to work during the pandemic, but we did not have that choice. The government says *Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao* [Save daughters, Educate daughters]. Aren't we *betis* [daughters] of this country?"

Anganwadi workers and helpers were the only field-level workers of the government, available at all times and on all occasions, she said. "Who else does the government deploy but us to distribute benefits to people? I have spent 11 years as an ICDS worker. When I joined, my honorarium was Rs.5,000 and now I get Rs.11,811. It was not given to us on a platter. This was possible only after we fought for it," said Sunita.

The strikers are bitter over the way the government treated them during the pandemic. ICDS services were disrupted as workers and helpers were roped in to support the government's efforts in COVID management. While ASHA workers got a measly amount of of Rs.1,000 as a one-time honorarium, ICDS workers and helpers got nothing at all. Shakuntala said that when it was brought to the Chief Minister's notice in the December 29 meeting about how ICDS workers and helpers had distributed two and a half lakh masks, ration, worked at vaccination centres and encouraged people to get vaccinated, he feigned ignorance.

Later, Khattar assured the union representatives that all anganwadi workers and helpers would also be given a one-time amount of Rs.1,000, but later the government issued a notification saying that only those who had been given duty during COVID would get the honorarium. "This notification was issued while our strike was on. It was done mainly to break the strike. Our women turned it down," Shakuntala said. For women like her, it is a do-or-die situation.

In an effort to bypass the angandwadi staff, the State government instructed ICDS supervisors to get sarpanchs to distribute rations to pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children under five years of age. The sarpanchas, it was learnt, refused to do it. "The government is trying to find alternatives but not succeeding at it. We feel bad for the poor nutritional and health status of children and pregnant and lactating mothers. But what do we do? We do not have any option," Shakuntala said.

Anganwadi workers and helpers are the linchpin of the largest supplementary nutrition programme in the world, but they are not recognised as government employees even though their services are sought for every kind of government work. The ICDS scheme describes an anganwadi worker as "a lady selected from the local community, a community-based front-line honorary worker of the ICDS programme. She is an agent of social change, mobilising community support for better care of young children, girls and women."

For years, anganwadi workers in the country have been fighting to get the Union government to recognise them as regular government employees and give them benefits accordingly. But successive Central governments have failed to grant that recognition or to regularise their services.

The government's standard response to their demand is that under the ICDS, anganwadi workers are honorary workers and hence are not eligible to be treated on a par with government employees. But it is not as if the definition of an anganwadi worker is set in stone. In contrast, supervisors, Child Development Project Officers and District Programme Officers who are part of the ICDS team are regular government employees.

In the Union Budget 2022-23, the Central government declared that the infrastructure of two lakh anganwadi centres would be upgraded with audiovisual aids supported by clean energy. Yet the Budget Estimate for 2022-23 is less than that for 2021-22. The women say that along with audiovisual aids, it would be better if the government provided the centres with basic infrastructure such as toilets and drinking water. ☐

**THE WOMEN** are ready to sit on an indefinite protest until the government relents.

# A wake-up call

A Parliamentary Standing Committee pulls up the Rural Development Ministry in its report on a "critical evaluation" of the MGNREGA and calls for more investment in the scheme. BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

A PARLIAMENTARY Standing Committee report of the Ministry of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, tabled in February, strongly recommends enhancing the budget for implementation of work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, higher wage rates, and increasing the number of persondays to 150 from the present 100 days. (The report makes 33 recommendations in all.) It has also pulled up the Rural Development Ministry for its "lackadaisical" approach towards the scheme.

The committee was "bemused" that the Ministry as the nodal agency had highlighted only the "loopholes" of State governments. This was "completely unacceptable" and the blame game was "unpalatable", it said. The need of the hour in a federal form of government was "not finger-pointing" to the "detriment of a public welfare scheme" but working in "unison" with the "common goal of the upliftment of the lives of the rural masses". It described as "unfathomable" the notified wage rates of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and West Bengal at Rs.198, Rs.204, Rs.198 and Rs.213 respectively.

Taking a strong view of pending wage liabilities of Rs.2,76,378.22 lakh as of November 2021, the committee stated that it felt "sorry" at the state of affairs. Noting that the beneficiaries of the scheme were people whose hopes for a "decent upliftment of their economic status" hinged upon the "succour" from the scheme, it held that "no reason was good enough" for the "huge pendencies" and asked the Ministry to "pull up its socks".

It has also expressed surprise at the reduced budget for the scheme in the current fiscal year. The commit-

JOTHI RAMALINGAM B.

**WOMEN WORKING** under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act on the banks of Padianallur tank in Chennai, a file photograph. Women generated over 50 per cent of the persondays under the scheme in the current fiscal.

tee, which undertook field visits in some States, observed that the Revised Estimates for the last four to five years had been going up in keeping with the increased demand for work. Therefore, the rationale for keeping the budget estimate for 2021-22 at Rs.73,000 crore was "perplexing", especially as the expenditure for the previous financial year was Rs.1,11,170.86 crore. The government had itself acknowledged a surge in demand for work in 2020-21 because of reverse migration and the consequent dependence on MGNREGA work as a "last resort of solace". The Department of Rural Development, it said, should review its budget keeping in mind expenditure of the last few years.

The report is a scathing indictment of the reduced importance given to the MGNREGS, considering the massive scale of rural distress, rural unemployment both in the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. The MGNREGS as envisaged under the Act is a demand-driven scheme. The Central government under-provided for the scheme in the Budget Estimates of 2021-22, which drew a critical response in the parliamentary committee report. The Budget Estimates for 2022-23 also under-provided for the scheme.

Government spokespersons defend the decision on the grounds that the scheme is demand-driven and is a safety net rather than a solution for unemployment; they say that the Budget for the current fiscal focusses on creating employment and that the dependence on MGNREGA has been consequently reduced. In 2020-21, the allocation for the scheme in the Revised Estimates was much higher than the figure in the Budget Estimates because of the lockdown-induced distress; yet the amount that was released finally fell short of the figure in the Revised Estimates. The Central funds released until September 2021 was less than what was released in 2017-18.

Under the 2005 Act, hundred days of guaranteed wage employment must be provided each financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. The committee found that the average number of days of work per household was 51.52 days in 2020-21 and 31.68 days in 2021-22 until August 2021.

The average wage rate in 2021-22 was Rs.206.39 and Rs.200.72 in 2020-21.

Under the Act, the Central government is supposed to meet the cost of wages and three-fourths of the material cost of the scheme and a percentage of the administrative costs. The State governments are supposed to pay the unemployment allowance, one fourth of the material cost and administrative costs of the State Councils. The Act provides for an unemployment allowance for those persons who were not given work despite an application seeking

PTI

**GIRIRAJ SINGH,** Union Minister for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, in the Lok Sabha on February 11.

employment, payable within 15 days of the application. Wage payment delays have to be compensated for.

The households that were provided employment in 2021-22 numbered 537.78 lakh (as of August 31, 2021), of whom 7.76 lakh received 100 days of work. As these figures are until August 2021 only, it can be assumed that the actual numbers are somewhat higher. However, if the figures of the previous year are looked at, the scenario is not very encouraging. In 2020-21, 755.36 lakh households were provided employment, but only 72 lakh households completed 100 days of work. In 2019-20, of 548.23 households that were provided work, 40.60 lakh households completed 100 days of employment. The average number of days of employment per household was 31.68 in 2021-22 (until August 2021), 51.52 in 2020-21, 48.4 in 2019-20 and 50.88 in 2018-19. Among the BIMARU States, the average was below the national average in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar and Jharkhand. The States that ranked consistently above the national average were Kerala, Meghalaya and Mizoram. The work completion rate was over 90 per cent in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Mizoram, Nagaland, Puducherry and Tripura.

### WAGE RATE VARIATIONS

There was a wide variation in the wage rates. In some gram panchayats in Sikkim the wage rate was as high as Rs.313. In Goa, Kerala, and the Union Territory of Nicobar it was more than Rs.290. In Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, it was as low as Rs.204 and in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand below Rs.200. The figures also revealed a huge pendency in payment of wages running into lakhs of rupees for workers from the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and others. Strangely, there appeared to be no problem of pendent wages in the Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled States of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Tripura, Goa and Assam.

Among non-BJP States, only Chhattisgarh claimed to have no wage backlog. Overall, unpaid wages ran to the tune of Rs.33,918.30 lakhs for workers from Scheduled Castes; Rs.33,054.60 lakh to workers from Scheduled Tribes and Rs.2,09,405.32 lakh for those in the "Others" category. According to the Ministry, the delay in the payment of wages was because of the failure in the transfer of payment, which was caused by inactive, frozen, closed or absent Aadhaar accounts. The Secretary of the Department of Rural Development put the responsibility on the State governments for not sorting out the technical failures involved, unmindful of the fact that it was the Centre that had made Aadhaar-linked accounts mandatory for payments. He claimed that the rejected transactions amounted to only 1.15 per cent of the total number of responses. Yet, in actual numbers the rejected transactions added up to 3,99,096. For the government, this was a technical glitch; for the three lakh or so workers and their families, it might have been a choice between life and death.

### ONUS ON STATES: CENTRE

In response to a question by the parliamentary committee on whether the government would consider increasing the number of days of work under the scheme, the Ministry of Rural Development said 50 days' additional work could be provided in the event of natural calamities. The onus was on the States to provide extra days of employment if they wanted. The committee was also told that no State had been provided funds for additional working days in the current fiscal year. So, despite the extraordinary circumstances that the rural poor had faced prior to, during and after the pandemic, there was neither any intention to substantially increase the wage rates notified by the Centre, nor any plan to increase the number of days under the scheme.

Data shared by the Ministry from 2018 onwards showed that almost 54 per cent of workers under the scheme were women. Nearly 52.6 per cent of persondays was generated by women in the current financial year. The large number of job cards issued each year since 2018-19 was also a reflection of the crisis. There was a wide gap between the job cards issued and actual employment provided to households. For instance, in 2018-19, 1,334.63 lakh job cards were issued, but households that were provided employment numbered 526.60 lakh. In 2019-20, the corresponding figures were 1,407.24 lakh and 548.23 lakh; in

**WORK UNDER** the MGNREGA in May 2021 in Telangana's Khammam district. Reverse migration during the pandemic pushed up demand for work.

2021-22, 1,532.99 lakh job cards were issued but only 755.32 lakh households were provided employment. In 2021-22, until November 2021, 1,558.44 lakh job cards were issued but less than 50 per cent, or 605.60 lakh households, were provided work.

The problem in muster roll updation, resulting in delayed payment of wages, was attributed to lack of Internet facilities at the gram panchayat level. About 1.25 lakh gram panchayats had Bharat Net, but as Internet networks were not available, muster rolls could not be filled out or updated. The Ministry had communicated to the States that if social audits were found wanting, money would not be released. The social audits identify financial misappropriation, financial deviation, grievances and process violations. For 2020-21, the government claimed it had made the highest ever allocation for a financial year under the scheme.

### WIDE DISPARITY IN WAGE RATES

The committee was critical of the wide disparity in daily wages across States. It ranged from "as low as" Rs.193 in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh and Rs.198 in Bihar and Jharkhand to Rs.318 in three gram panchayats in Sikkim. The majority of the States were found to be paying less than Rs.250. The committee expressed concern at the high cost of living, inflation and price rise of essential commodities and that the scheme beneficiaries, all belonging to marginalised sections, were surviving on "such amounts". If wages, it reasoned, were of such nominal nature, people would be forced to move to urban locales. That the wages were a non-incentive was evident from the fact that of 521.61 lakh households that were provided employment in 2018-19, only 52.58 lakh households completed 100 days of employment. In 2021-22, until August 31, 2021, of 537.78 lakh households that were provided employment only 7.76 lakh households completed 100 days of employment. This figure, it said, was "even more poor" than that of previous years.

RAO G.N.

The committee observed that low wages were one of the major reasons why people opted out of the scheme. It lamented that despite the committee's repeated recommendation to index the wages with the cost of living, little had been done. A proposal to have a Consumer Price Index (Rural) instead of the present Consumer Price Index (Agricultural Labour) had not been considered. It noted that the wage rates would continue to languish due to no change in indexation. It has also recommended a uniform wage rate to be fixed by the nodal agency given the wide range of wage rates. Wage rates fluctuating from Rs.193 to Rs.318 across States and Union Territories in "no way seem justified". Bridging the disparity and bringing wages at par would "not only end the conundrum of uncertainty among beneficiaries but serve the larger purpose of welfare of MGNREGA workers".

The scheme was a last "fall back" option for numerous poor people. It is "high time" that the scheme was revamped in view of the "changing times" and the pandemic. It recommended that the number of days needed to be increased from 100 to 150 days. Describing the picture regarding payment of wages as very grim, it said that it was a "breach of trust of the goal of the scheme". It expressed shock at the low rates paid in lieu of unemployment allowance paid by States and at the Ministry's "passing the buck" approach.

The committee was concerned about the low rates of social audits and urged the Department to take up the matter in "all earnest". It also suggested that social audits be placed in the public domain. It expressed concern at the non-participation of officials from related departments in decisions relating to work commissioned under the scheme. The success of the projects depended on the choices made at the selection level, it noted: "Rather than stalling the project at later stages, discussion in the initial stage would go a long way in ensuring the success of the projects." It pulled up the Ministry for its failure to appoint ombudsmen as mandated under the Act. Only 263 ombudsmen had been appointed so far against 715 possible appointments. No reason, it said, could be enough to "justify such callousness" for such a long period of time.

Most experts of repute have argued that the government needed to "put money in the hands of the people" in order to generate demand. Given the nature of the crisis and sluggishness in recovery of economic activity, for quite some time many social scientists and others have been demanding enhancement of both rural and urban wages, increase in the number of days of employment, and initiation of an urban employment guarantee scheme.

The committee has rightly argued for enhancing the expenditure for the scheme from the present allocation. For the rural poor, the crisis is immediate and not a prospective one. The increasing allocation since the inception of the Act indicates that rural unemployment levels continue to be high: people are willing to do hard manual work for even low wages. The report underscores all these concerns. Though its recommendations are not binding on the government, it is nevertheless a document that needs to be taken up seriously especially as it is attuned to present-day realities faced by the rural poor. ☐

# Unparalleled legacy

Rahul Bajaj, chairman of the Bajaj Group, built his two- and three-wheeler brands around the Indian sentiment and took bold business decisions to create a conglomerate that ranks among the top in India. BY **ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

VERY few industrialists in India have been able to combine the running of a corporate conglomerate and socialist ideology. Rahul Bajaj was one of them. The 83-year-old chairman emeritus of the Bajaj Group of companies, who passed away after a prolonged illness on February 12, was a unique entrepreneur known for his ability to steer his ship with a rare sensitivity towards people and country. A pioneer, a visionary and Indian industry's conscience, Rahul Bajaj's steadfast faith in the domestic industry set him apart from his peers. His towering presence in the country's business landscape will be missed.

Rahul Bajaj's esteemed lineage would have had a bearing on his belief system. His grandfather Jamnalal Bajaj, who founded the Bajaj group, was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi and a significant leader in the freedom struggle. Rahul Bajaj's father, Kamalnayan Bajaj, expanded the family business during the early years of independence and was instrumental in laying the foundation for India's self-sufficiency goal. Rahul Bajaj took over the reins of the group in 1965 and, taking his grandfather and father's legacy forward, navigated the company through the period of Nehruvian socialism and later the licence raj to eventually create his own legacy—a multinational empire that diversified into the finance, insurance, lighting and steel sectors. The Bajaj Group today has a market capitalisation of over Rs.8.4 lakh crore and is among India's 10 most prominent business houses.

Every obituary that appeared in newspapers on his passing used the word fearless. Rahul Bajaj was fearless at several levels. He took bold yet calculated business decisions that helped build the company to its present status. He decided that the group would not give up when the Indira Gandhi government stopped its international collaboration with Piaggio to produce the Vespa scooter. Bajaj knew India needed an affordable vehicle and capitalised on the company's ability to produce one. He worked through a legal battle with Piaggio and produced the Bajaj Chetak. Such was the success of the scooter that there was a 10-year waiting period for the vehicle. He then fought vigorously during the restrictive 1970s licence period to meet the demand. When Japan's Honda group sought entry into India in the 1980s, Rahul Bajaj was firm that the government should only allow the technology to enter and that manufacturing should be done locally.

The Chetak held a monopoly in the market for several years. Corporate commentators say that although the company had a firm grip over the two- and three-wheeler segments, Rahul Bajaj as chairman of the group never compromised on quality, design, functionality and integrity. By entering the international market in the 1980s, the Bajaj Group became one of India's first home-grown companies to become a global name.

Rahul Bajaj had his ear to the ground as he went about building his brands around the Indian sentiment. The iconic "Hamara Bajaj" slogan for various Bajaj two-wheelers will forever be etched in the minds of at least two generations of Indians. If the Chetak scooter gave the aspiring salaried Indian a feeling of achievement, the zippy Sunny scooter, which was launched two decades later, gave Indian girls their much-needed ticket to independence. The Pulsar motorbike appealed to the middle-class consumers who found the poor quality of public transport a hindrance to their daily commute.

Known to be a nationalist, much before the word assumed the connotations it has today, Rahul Bajaj was not entirely supportive of the economic reforms that were rolled out in the 1990s. During India's critical transition into becoming an open market, Rahul Bajaj lost no opportunity to voice his apprehensions over allowing foreign companies into the Indian market. As a member of the "Bombay Club"—a group that included C.K. Birla, Lala Bharat Ram of the Shriram Group and a few other top industrialists—he said the government should provide a level playing field for Indian and foreign businesses. For this Bajaj was often labelled a "protectionist" and "anti-foreign business". He did not deny it but neither did he claim that he was against liberalisation. His contemporaries say that he was pro-modernisation and strongly believed that Indian business had the ability to be a big player in manufacturing in the global arena. Rahul Bajaj, like many others of his generation, held on to the principle that India's way forward would be through the development of industry, which could generate massive employment that would obviously have a ripple effect and lead to a higher standard of living for Indians. Rahul Bajaj was singularly responsible for Pune evolving into an auto belt. He lived with his family on the Bajaj factory campus at Akurdi. Both his children were educated at a local school in line with his ideology that they should be one with the workers. Rahul Bajaj went to St. Stephens College in Delhi and was an alumnus of the Harvard Business School.

**RAHUL BAJAJ,** chairman of Bajaj Auto Ltd, and Rajiv Bajaj, managing director, at the launch of the Probiking showroom in Pune on September 6, 2005.

### FEARLESS AND FORTHRIGHT

Forthright on public platforms, Rahul Bajaj was known to question and put ministers and bureaucrats on the spot when it came to policy decisions on Indian industry. The following are some of the famous Bajaj moments: In 2002, a few months after the Gujarat riots, when the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) was hosting Narendra Modi, at the time Gujarat's Chief Minister, Rahul Bajaj asked Modi during question time whether Gujarat was safe for investors. He took a hardline position at the 2003 World Trade Organisation conference in Cancun, where he fought for the protection of Indian agriculture.

More recently, in 2019, at a high-powered meeting attended by Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, he told Amit Shah: "You are doing good work, but if we criticise you, there is no confidence that you will appreciate that. I may be wrong. But we all feel that." He added: "In UPA2 [United Progressive Alliance's second term in office], we could criticise anyone…." The comment shocked the audience, but needless to say, it was an example of Rahul Bajaj's fearless personality. In a climate under which even the most powerful industrialists have capitulated to the present ruling regime's ways, Rahul Bajaj stood by his convictions.

While several Indian industries, especially in the manufacturing and engineering sector, found it hard to cope without protectionist policies, the Bajaj Group steered through under his able leadership. The company is ranked the world's fourth largest two- and three-wheeler manufacturer. The Bajaj brand has expanded to Latin America, Africa, West Asia and South and South-East Asia.

Rahul Bajaj was the chairman of Indian Airlines in 1986. He was honoured with the Padma Bhushan in 2001. He was the CII president in 1979 and 1999, leading the country through two tumultuous economic periods. Rahul Bajaj was a Rajya Sabha member from 2006 to 2010. In 2005, he handed over the reins of the company to his son Rajiv Bajaj. The group faced a difficult situation following a family feud in 2009, with Rahul Bajaj and his brother parting ways. The doyen of Indian industry, Rahul Bajaj has left a strong and unparalleled legacy. □

# Trees get a saviour

Maharashtra becomes the first State to take a step towards conservation of urban trees by constituting State- and local-level tree authorities. BY **LYLA BAVADAM**

VIVEK BENDRE

**AN ACTIVIST** trying to protect a 70-year-old tree in Churchgate, Mumbai, from Metro rail workers who want to cut it, on May 24, 2017.

TAKING the lead in urban tree conservation, the Maharashtra government constituted a Maharashtra State Tree Authority in January and appointed a chairperson and three members to govern it. The core mandate of the tree authority is "increasing the tree cover in urban areas and protecting the existing ones".

Local civic bodies and councils will also have their own tree authorities, but the State-level tree authority will be the final arbitrator in all cases. It has to monitor the functioning of local tree authorities; the protection and conservation of heritage trees, that is, trees of about 50 years or more; and the felling of heritage trees.

The notification issued by the government named the Secretary of the State's Department of Environment and Climate Change and its Director as the ex-officio chairman and ex-officio member-secretary respectively of the authority. The Secretaries of the Urban Development and Forest Departments have been appointed as ex-officio members. There is also a tree expert whose knowledge the other team members will have to rely on.

## AMENDMENT TO TREES ACT

The State Tree Authority will be the final authority for deciding applications local municipal tree authorities refer to it. It is tasked with looking into projects that require the felling of more than 200 trees that are five years or more in age. It will also have to make sure that no subterfuge is indulged in when it comes to the number of trees being cut. Project developers have been known to subdivide their project plots so as to project fewer trees. The tree authority will have to ensure that the developer has prepared a tree plan, which, in essence, says that the area being developed should aim for a 33 per cent green belt. The process of forming the State Tree Authority began in July 2021 when Aaditya Thackeray, who heads the Department of Environment and Climate Change, tabled a proposal in the Legislative Assembly for an ordinance that amends the Maharashtra (Urban Areas) Protection and Preservation of Trees Act, 1975. The Cabinet approved the proposal.

It was spurred by the need to improve the forest cover in urban areas and protect old trees, make more stringent rules for felling trees for burgeoning development projects and compel more compensatory planting to be carried out. After the Cabinet approval, Thackeray tweeted: "Through this amendment, we will be able to safeguard green covers across urban landscapes and also provide a robust mechanism to protect heritage trees...." The amendment allows for a fine for illegal felling of trees from Rs.5,000 to Rs.1 lakh a tree. It is encouraging that the Cabinet also approved a proposal for the conservation of mangrove and coral reef ecosystems under the Green Climate Fund. This will be implemented in 11 tehsils in 4 coastal districts of Maharashtra. The Green Climate Fund is a part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and assists developing countries in climate change mitigation practices.

### LOOPHOLES IN ACT

Although the amendments to the Trees Act are most welcome, there still seem to be loopholes that do not bode well for trees. Consider the case of heritage trees, which are meant to get special protection. The Act does allow for the cutting of a heritage tree under certain conditions. According to the current Compensatory Plantation Rules in the State, one sapling has to be planted per tree cut (in Mumbai, it is 1:3). But if it is a heritage tree, then the number of compensatory saplings to be planted has to be equal to the tree's age. This is determined by extracting a straw-thin bore from the trunk that reveals the number of growth rings, which is the age of the tree, a process known as dendrochronology. Each compensatory sapling should be at least six to eight feet in height to ensure its survival in the replanting process and the new plantation should be in the same plot as the old tree or in some common amenity plot like a park. And the organisation responsible has to care for the plantation for seven years and geotag the trees so that they can be monitored via satellite and counted in the tree census.

While all this is encouraging, what is discouraging is that the amended Act offers an alternative to compensatory planting. The feller of the tree can get away with paying compensation for the economic valuation of the felled tree. While how the valuation would be done has not been defined by the State, there was a suggestion that the determining factor could be the amount of oxygen the tree releases into the atmosphere.

PRASHANT WAYDANDE

**A TREE THAT WAS CUT** in Aarey unit no 19, in Mumbai on September 30, 2018, by the Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Limited.

Fortunately, there is a Supreme Court judgment that took a more holistic view. In March 2021, while dealing with a matter relating to the cutting of trees more than 150 years old in West Bengal for road widening and road bridges, the Supreme Court said there was a need to "prescribe a mechanism for assessment of both intrinsic and instrumental value of the trees.... To calculate just and fair compensation... for felling of trees... it is... imperative to make a realistic assessment of the economic value of a tree, which may be permitted to fell, concerning its value to the environment and its longevity, about factors such as the production of oxygen and carbon sequestration, soil conservation, protection of flora/fauna, its role in habitat and ecosystem integrity and any other ecologically relevant factor, distinct from timber/wood."

The first test for the Maharashtra State Tree Authority is already on the cards. Three proposals have been referred to it for felling trees for the metro rail project. Its decision will be something of a test of the authority's stated intentions. ☐

WORLD AFFAIRS

# HISTORIC SUMMIT

AP

**VLADIMIR PUTIN** and Xi Jinping in Beijing on February 4. Russia and China have been able to forge a comprehensive strategic partnership after almost 60 years.

Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin agree to expand strategic and economic ties in the face of the West's efforts to militarily encircle China and Russia. BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

IN THE FIRST WEEK OF FEBRUARY, AS THE crisis over Ukraine was heating up, Russian President Vladimir Putin flew to Beijing for the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. The United States had led a diplomatic boycott of the games and called on its friends and allies to follow suit, citing the Chinese government's alleged ill-treatment of its Uighur Muslim minority. The United Kingdom, Australia and Canada were among its prominent allies that joined the boycott. The Winter Olympics was a prestige event for the Chinese government. Despite the pandemic's adverse impact and the global spread of the Omicron strain, it ensured that the games went ahead on schedule.

India too joined the boycott at the eleventh hour, seemingly angered by the announcement that a Chinese army commander involved in the 2020 Galwan valley clashes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) would participate in the opening ceremony. The U.S. welcomed the Indian move, coming as it did just ahead of the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting in Australia. The Quad comprises Australia, Japan, India and the U.S. The holding of the meeting to coincide with the Winter Olympics was a strong signal to China. Russia, too, has made no effort to hide its deep suspicions about the Quad grouping.

## GROWING CLOSENESS

The in-person meeting between Xi Jinping and Putin was the first one between the two leaders in more than two years. In fact, Putin was the first foreign leader Xi has met since the beginning of 2020. In the last decade, Putin had met his Chinese counterpart on 38 different occasions, illustrating the growing closeness between the two countries and their leaders. Ukraine figured prominently in the bilateral talks although it did not figure specifically in the joint statement issued following the talks.

REUTERS

**ANTONY BLINKEN,** U.S. Secretary of State. At the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting, he branded Russia's alleged military threats against Ukraine as a challenge to "rules-based order".

The Chinese Foreign Ministry said that the two leaders had an "in-depth and thorough exchange of views on China-Russia relations and a series of major issues concerning international security and stability". The statement from the Kremlin said that the two countries "believe that certain states, military and political alliances and coalitions seek to obtain, directly or indirectly, unilateral military advantages to the detriment of the security of others".

The joint statement emphasised that both the countries "oppose" the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and called on its partners to give up their "ideologised Cold War approaches" and respect the sovereignty, security and national interests of other countries. "Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine stability in their common adjacent regions," the statement said.

In a message meant for Washington, the two Presidents pledged "to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext, oppose colour revolutions and ... increase cooperation in the aforementioned areas". The regime change in Ukraine in 2014 was the result of a "colour revolution" aided and abetted by the West. Both leaders pledged to deepen "back-to-back strategic coordination and uphold international fairness and justice, side by side". The joint statement said that the strategic choices made by the two leaders would have a far-reaching global impact.

The Chinese leadership is fully aware that NATO's expansion poses a significant threat to the country's security. In 2020, NATO issued a position paper describing China as one of "the top threats" it faces. While identifying Russia as the biggest threat, the report titled "NATO 2030" calls on the alliance to focus on China too. "China has an increasingly global strategic agenda, supported by its growing economic and military heft," the report said.

The report recommended that NATO should strengthen ties with countries such as Australia, Japan and South Korea in the Asia-Pacific region. It also called for an internal NATO discussion about forming a partnership with India, saying that the country "shares fundamental interests and values with the alliance". According to the NATO report, the alliance could establish stronger ties with the Quad to coordinate a response to China's growing influence.

Australia further strengthened its military alliance with the U.S.

following the creation of the AUKUS alliance last year. This military grouping, consisting of Australia, the U.K. and the U.S., is aimed specifically at China. The treaty gives Australia access to nuclear submarine technology. Putin and Xi said they were "seriously concerned" about the AUKUS alliance. "Russia and China believe that such actions are contrary to the objective of security and sustainable development of the Asia-Pacific region, increase the danger of an arms race in the region, and pose serious risks of nuclear proliferation," the joint statement said.

It criticised U.S.' withdrawal from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and urged Washington "to abandon its plans to deploy intermediate-range and short-range ground-based missiles in the Asia-Pacific region and Europe". The West's plans to encircle China and Russia militarily is the main reason for Moscow and Beijing deciding to strengthen their strategic and economic ties.

### ECONOMIC TIES

In another important sign of deepening economic ties between the two countries, the Russian state-owned oil firm Rosneft announced that it would supply 100 million tonnes of oil to China over the next 10 years. The oil will be routed through Kazakhstan. Gazprom, another state-controlled firm, also announced a 30-year agreement with China to build a new pipeline to supply 10 million cubic metres of gas annually. China and Russia have agreed to boost their annual bilateral trade to $250 billion.

China has indicated that it will not adhere to the U.S.-led sanctions imposed on Russia over the Ukraine issue. Washington has been trying to use the threat of sanctions to pressure Moscow over Ukraine and other issues.

### 'LANDMARK DOCUMENT'

The joint statement, which has been described as a "landmark document", reflects a shared world view and spells out a set of principles to govern international relations. The 5,300-word document is a testament to the comprehensive strategic partnership that the two countries have been able to forge after a gap of almost 60 years. It can be viewed as a direct challenge to the U.S. The document talks about the need for "a redistribution of power in the world".

> China has indicated that it will not adhere to the U.S.-led sanctions imposed on Russia over the Ukraine issue.

Putin said that the relationship between Russia and China "cannot be compared to anything in the world". According to the joint statement, the "friendship between the two states knows no limits, there are no forbidden areas of cooperation".

It said that the two countries had forged a "new kind of relationship" that is not aimed "against third countries" and is "superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War". The document states that the two countries will cooperate on all issues ranging from climate change to combating terrorism and signals their readiness to work with all international partners in a multipolar world.

The two states have prioritised the need for multipolarity in the world. They want the United Nations to play a key role in a world where no single hegemonic power will try to impose its own standards on a unipolar chessboard and "poses a serious threat to global and regional peace and stability and undermines the world order".

Importantly, the joint statement on "International

SANDRA SANDERS/REUTERS

**S. JAISHANKAR,** External Affairs Minister (right), with his Australian counterpart Marise Payne after a Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting in Melbourne on February 12.

Relations Entering a New Era" emphasises that "a trend has emerged towards redistribution of power in the world" so that every country will have a voice "that promotes more democratic international relations". The document insists that "there is no one-size-fits-all template to guide countries in establishing democracy" and that all countries "must respect the rights of people to independently determine the development paths of their countries".

Russia and China have defined democracy "as a means of citizens' participation in the governments of their country with the view to improving the well-being of the population and implementing the principle of popular government". The document states that each country can choose its form of democracy, taking into consideration its history, culture, political and social background and that only people can decide whether their country is democratic or not. The document says that both Russia and China "are world powers with rich cultural and historical heritage (that) have long-standing traditions of democracy".

### U.S.' UNILATERAL APPROACHES

The Joe Biden administration has been seeking to build "an alliance of democracies" to counter China and Russia. The U.S. has been demanding the Western model of democracy for all countries even while playing the role of a hegemon in international politics. "Some actors," the statement said, "representing but the minority on the international stage, continue to advocate unilateral approaches to addressing international issues and resort to force". Both Beijing and Moscow have become strong votaries for the "democratisation of international relations" which will give all nations a voice on the international stage.

The Russian side reiterated its support for the "One China principle", confirming that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China. The Biden administration, like the previous Donald Trump administration, is vigorously trying to undermine the "One China" policy. The policy was the basis on which diplomatic ties between Washington and Beijing were established in 1979.

At the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting in Melbourne in the second week of February, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was critical of both Russia and China. He branded Russia's alleged military threats against Ukraine as a challenge to "rules-based order" and said that the crisis mattered to the Quad although Ukraine "was half a world away". In an interview with *The Australian* newspaper, Blinken said that "China's ambition over time is to be the leading military, economic, diplomatic and political power, not just in the region but in the world".

He, however, went on to say that the U.S. and its allies were a far more formidable coalition than the emerging Russia-China alliance. Blinken said that Washington's goal was to strengthen the alliance against China and Russia by bringing together "literally dozens of allies and partners" through NATO, the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe and through allies such as Japan, Australia and South Korea in the Indo-Pacific region. He said that Washington was "constantly putting new coalitions, new partnerships, together, whether it is the Quad or the AUKUS".

Although Blinken and the three other Foreign Ministers continue to claim that the Quad is not a security grouping, the focus of the Melbourne meeting was China. In an editorial, *The Australian* said that it was common knowledge that "the Quad is designed to make sure that Beijing cannot exercise hegemony over a large part of the Indo-Pacific". The paper said that the "Quad's unity has put China on notice".

Not satisfied with ratcheting up tensions in Eastern Europe, the U.S. now seems intent to do the same in the Asia-Pacific region as it seeks ways and means to confront Russia and China.

# Continent of coups

The recent military takeovers in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso are the result of increasing terror attacks from extremist forces aligned to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, and growing public resentment against the failure of the NATO forces deployed in the West African region. BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

TRAITRE!
ESTP
Ecole des Sciences et Tech
HFI
PIPEL BIRD

ANNE MIMAULT/REUTERS

**PROTESTERS** demand the resignation of President Roch Kabore and the departure of French military forces in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on November 27, 2021.

IN THE LAST COUPLE OF YEARS, AFRICA HAS witnessed a series of military coups reminiscent of those that regularly occurred in the region until the 1980s. Most of the recent military takeovers have taken place in West Africa, but the trend threatens to spread wider. In 2021, the military in Sudan ended its uneasy cohabitation with the civilian government by staging a coup, the second in three years. In Libya, the military strongman General Khalifa Haftar has been trying to take over the country for many years. He already controls half of Libya, including the city of Benghazi.

In West Africa, the cycle of coups began in Chad. The military did not allow a transition to civilian rule after the death of President Idriss Deby in April 2021. Deby had himself come to power in a 1990 military coup but tried to legitimise his power by holding regular, albeit flawed, elections every five years. After his sudden demise, the Chadian army appointed his son, Mahamat Idris Deby, as the new President, without holding an election or getting parliamentary approval. There were no serious protests from either France or the United States on the blatant trampling of democratic norms in Chad. Even the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) accepted the "fait accompli". It was an encouraging signal to the other ambitious military men in the region. There was an abortive military coup in the West African state of Niger in March 2021.

The events in Chad and Sudan did not elicit much criticism from the West. Chad, which has one of the better trained armies in the region, was the biggest supporter of "Barkhane", the code name for the French-led counter-insurgency war in the Sahel against the Islamist forces aligned to the Islamic State (I.S.) and Al Qaeda.

The French have a robust military presence in many of the Francophone West African states. The U.S., too, has a number of troops positioned in the region and has spent more than a billion dollars in security assistance to promote "stability" in the region. The Pentagon's Africa Command has been steadily expanding its footprint in the continent. The Sudanese military was in Washington's good books for its willingness to open ties with Israel and support the "Abraham accords". Until recently, Sudan was among the staunchest supporters of the Palestinian cause.

In Tunisia, the President usurped the powers of the elected civilian government with the help of the sections of the security establishment. Egypt is now under the total control of the military. In Algeria, the military has always played a key behind-the-scenes role in politics. In other African countries, many former army generals who had seized power have successfully entered civilian politics. Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria are prominent examples. President Buhari will be completing his second and final term in office this year.

Since the decolonisation of Africa began in the late 1950s, there have been more than 200 attempted military coups, averaging four a year between 1960 and 2000. Civilian governments in the region will have to watch their backs after the recent resurgence of military coups. In 2021, there were at least six reported military coup attempts in the continent, of which two were successful. In September 2021, the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, warned that military coups were back in the African continent and criticised the lack of international criticism.

Mali has witnessed two military coups within a span of 18 months. The last coup took place in August 2020. Colonel Assimi Goita, who led the coup in 2019 and was the Vice President in an interim government led by a civilian President, seized power in the middle of last year. The army leadership claimed that it had not been consulted in the formation of a new government. In mid 2021, the civilian government in Guinea led by President Alpha Conde was overthrown by the military. The coup was carried out by an elite special forces unit led by a 41-year-old officer, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya.

Doumbouya, who had undergone special training in the U.S., claimed that the army was forced to intervene because of corruption, human rights abuses and economic mismanagement by the civilian government. Guinea has one of the largest deposits of iron ore and and has a booming mining sector run by foreign firms.

RADIODIFFUSION TÉLÉVISION DU BURKINA / AFP

**PAUL-HENRI DAMIBA** speaks on national television three days after ousting Burkina Faso's civilian government led by President Kabore (below), on January 27.

unesco
unesco
75

JULIEN DE ROSA/ POOL VIA REUTERS

Tunisia
Mediterranean Sea
Libya
Red Sea
Mali
Niger
Chad
Sudan
Gulf of Aden
Burkina Faso
Guinea Bissau
Ghana
South Atlantic Ocean
Arabian Sea

> The Economic Community of West African States has not been able to do anything about the democracy deficit in many of its member states.

Guinea had experienced instability after the death of its first President, Sekou Toure, in 1984. The army intervened frequently in the country's politics, but the civilians had been in control for the last decade and there was relative stability.

In the last week of January, the civilian government in Burkina Faso led by President Roch Marc Kabore was ousted in a military coup. The coup was led by another U.S.-trained soldier, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba. He has since been installed as the interim President of the country. The country seemed to be settling into a period of comparative stability after the ouster of the long-ruling authoritarian ruler, Blaise Compaore, who had come to power after the assassination of the charismatic Colonel Thomas Sankara. Both Compaore and Sankara had led the military coup which overthrew the civilian government in 1983.

### REBELS AGAINST NEOCOLONIALISM

Colonel Sankara, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings of Ghana and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya were the three radical leaders of the African continent who dared to stand up against the neocolonial agenda of the West. Sankara was assassinated in 1987. He was only 37. The main suspect behind the killing was Compaore, his second in command. After seizing power, Compaore became one of the strongest allies of France in the region. He embraced all that Sankara had fought for.

The latest military coup in Burkina Faso comes at a time when a special military tribunal comprising both military and civilian officials had put on trial 14 men responsible for Sankara's assassination. Among them was Compoare, who is being tried in absentia. He has been given asylum in neighbouring Ivory Coast. After the coup, the case has now been adjourned indefinitely.

President Kabore, who was re-elected in 2019 to serve a second term, had installed a statue of Sankara in the capital along with a mausoleum, a cinema theatre and media library in his memory. Now that he has been deposed, the future of the trial is in doubt.

However, the main factors that have triggered the coups in Burkina Faso and Mali are related to domestic and international issues. Both the countries have been witnessing a rise in terror attacks from extremist forces aligned to Al Qaeda and the I.S. in the last couple of years. It was the intervention of the French military that prevented extremist forces from taking over northern Mali. In Burkina Faso and Niger, the same extremist groups have been targeting civilians and the armed forces. Thousands of civilians have been killed since 2018 and millions more displaced by the violence. An attack in November 2021 left more than 50 Burkinabe soldiers dead. That tragic event was exploited by sections of the army to justify the staging of the coup two months later.

In Mali and Burkina Faso, a strong resentment has been building up against the failure of French and forces from North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries deployed in the region. A decade after the French forces intervened in Mali, the influence of the extremist groups has spread even wider and the security situation in the Sahel region has further deteriorated. The announcement by the French government last year that it was sharply reducing its troop presence in Mali despite the increase in terror attacks infuriated the Malian government. France was accused of abandoning Mali in "mid-flight". The people in the region have not forgotten the policy of "Francafrique" practised by French governments after decolonisation. Under the policy, France propped up venal authoritarian rulers who protected its vested interests in the continent.

The new military governments of Mali and Burkina Faso have openly stated that if the French forces are unable to deal with the threat posed by extremist forces, then they should pack up and leave. After the military staged its latest coup in Burkina Faso, they were greeted by crowds, many of them waving Russian flags. Russian military contractors belonging to the Wagner Group, a private Russian company, have been deployed in the Central African Republic (CAR). They have been credited with restoring calm in country within a short period of time after their deployment. The CAR was torn by civil strife for most of the last decade. There are calls in Mali and Burkina Faso for the French military force to be replaced by Russian peacekeepers.

In early February, another attempted coup was narrowly thwarted in the West African state of Guinea Bissau. The presidential palace was under siege from a renegade faction of the military for more than five hours. However, President Umaro Sissaco Embalo has claimed that the attack was the work of "the criminal underworld" who were unhappy with his efforts to fight corruption and drug trafficking. He said that a former Navy admiral

L'afrique s'est reveillée
Cinq ans ou rien

ISSOUF SANOGO/AFP

**AT THE AFRICA** Cup of Nations 2021 football match at Limbe, Cameroon, on January 26, Mali supporters with a portrait of Colonel Assimi Goite.

and his associates who were convicted for transporting cocaine to the U.S. in 2013 were behind the violent coup attempt. More than 12 people were killed.

President Embalo said that the same group was responsible for the murder of the former President Joao Bernardo in 2009. Sections of the Army were implicated in his murder. Guinea Bissau, a former Portuguese colony situated on the West African coast, has become a notorious transit hub for narco-trafficking between Latin America and Europe. All the country's major institutions, including the army and political parties, have come under the influence of narco-traffickers.

### SANCTIONS IMPOSED

The ECOWAS as well as the African Union (A.U.) have suspended Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso after their elected governments were overthrown. The ECOWAS has imposed punitive sanctions on Mali for defying calls to reinstate the civilian government. Elections in the country were scheduled to be held in February, but now the military says it intends to remain in power for the next five years. The European Union (E.U.) has also decided to impose sanctions. Mali is already ranked among the poorest countries in the world. It ranks 184th out of 189 countries in the 2020 Human Development Index.

The sanctions seem to have further angered the Malian populace, already reeling under extreme economic hardship. The sanctions and criticism from the regional grouping and the West have only bolstered support for the putschists in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea. Guinea and Burkina Faso have said that they will not close the land borders with Mali as decreed by the ECOWAS. Both Mali and Burkina Faso are landlocked countries while Guinea has a coastline.

After the string of recent coups in the region, the ECOWAS is facing a credibility crisis. If the military-led governments are allowed to have their way, it will encourage other young army officers in member states to follow suit. In Guinea, the main reason why the coup was popular was because the civilian President Alpha Conde had exceeded his constitutionally mandated two-term limit. In Ivory Coast, President Alassane Ouattara commenced his third term in office last year although the constitution had originally stipulated only two terms. The Presidents of countries such as Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea have been in power for more than three decades. The ECOWAS has not been able to do anything about the democracy deficit in many of its member states. □

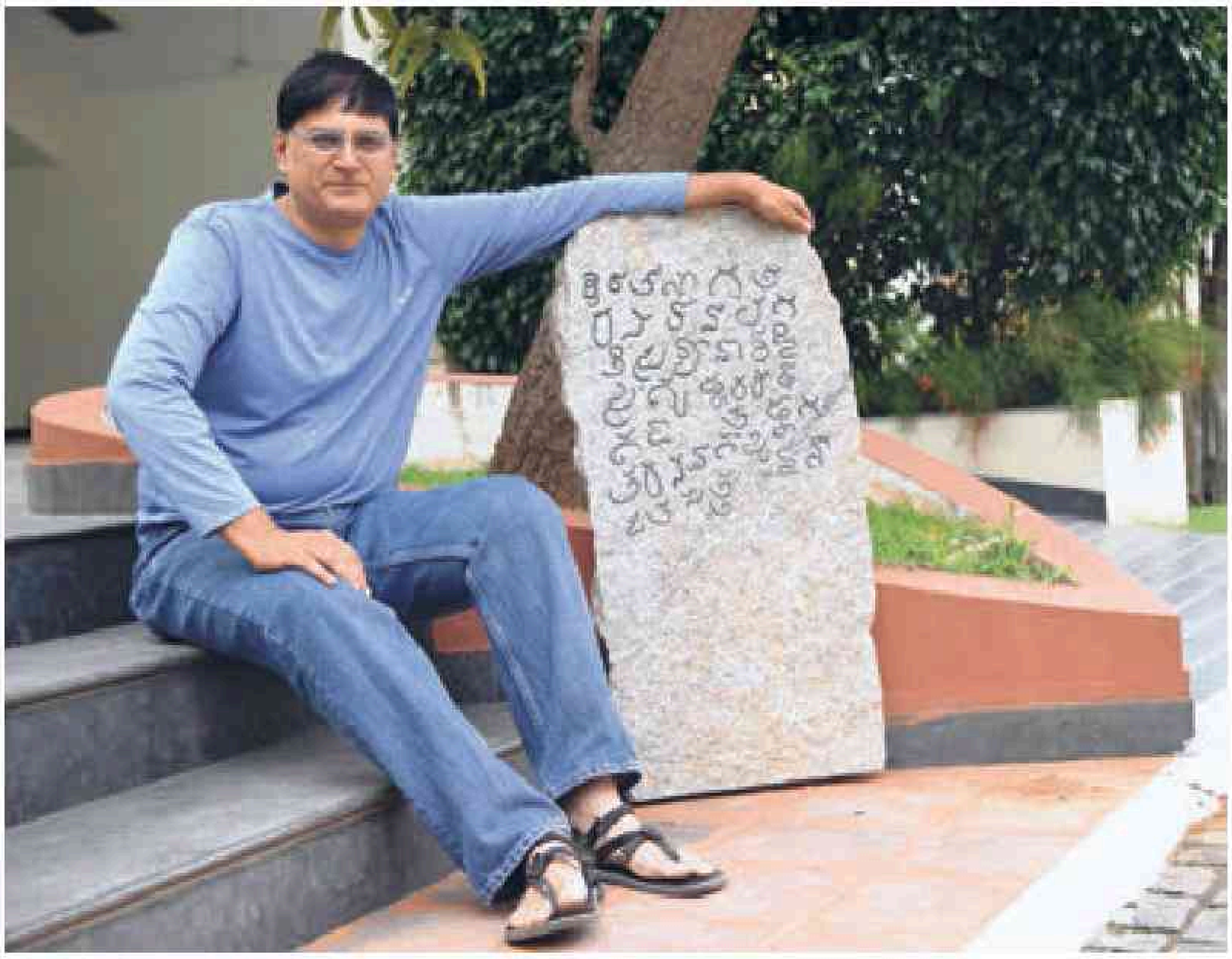
# Rerecording history

## A local history buff in Bengaluru finds technological solutions to preserve 1,000-year-old stone inscriptions for posterity.

BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

FOR 54-year-old P.L. Udaya Kumar, fieldwork means locating ancient stone inscriptions and scanning and deciphering them. This is what Udaya Kumar, who heads the Bengaluru-based Inscriptions 3D Digital Conservation Project, set out to do on a Saturday morning in early February. Udaya Kumar was informed by a contact residing in Chikkabanavara on the northern outskirts of Bengaluru that he had discovered two stone inscriptions in a eucalyptus grove. Udaya Kumar reached the spot along with two young researchers, R. Yuvaraju and M.N. Madhusudhan, who are part of the inscriptions project.

They excavated the two stone slabs that were lying half buried. The slabs, both one foot wide and one of them 5 ft long and the other 8 ft long, were taken to a vacant land lying between a warehouse for tiles and a solar heater manufacturing unit. *Frontline* found Udaya Kumar at that spot holding a purple bed sheet over a granite stone. It was mid-morning. Making use of the impromptu shade, Yuvaraju began scanning the stone inscription with a device that looked like a laundry iron. He slowly moved the three-dimensional scanner equipped with five cameras over the entire surface of the stone.


PHOTOGRAPHS: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**P.L. UDAYA KUMAR,** director, Inscriptions 3D Digital Conservation Project, with a replica of the 10th century Begur Buttanapathi 'veeragallu', or hero stone. On the fourth line is the first written record of the name Bengaluru in 10th century Kannada characters.

Before scanning the inscriptions, Udaya Kumar and his team pressed *maida* (all-purpose flour) on the stones. This revealed the script, making it possible to do a primary epigraphical analysis of the contents and the period on the basis of the evolutionary style of the script. This was corroborated when a rudimentary 3D image emerged, layer by layer, on a laptop computer. The inscriptions, which appeared enigmatic moments before, were now as clear as printed text. The script could be easily deciphered. Anyone with knowledge of old Kannada and Tamil scripts would be able to read the inscriptions with ease. By deciphering the inscriptions, Udaya Kumar and his team have added another layer of history in the local palimpsest of Chikkabanavara.

Udaya Kumar explained: "Looking at the inscriptions, I think the smaller stone dates back to the 10th century and is in *Halegannada* [old Kannada] while the longer one, which has Tamil characters inscribed on it, dates back to the 14th century."

To the gaze of an inexperienced person, the granite stones looked inscrutable and did not reveal their significance in any way, but to the experienced scrutiny of Udaya Kumar, the stones gave away their secrets willingly.

The genesis of the 3D inscriptions project can be traced to 2017 when Udaya Kumar began his quest to rediscover stone inscriptions that

**K.C. SHASHIKUMAR NAIK** scanning a 1029 C.E. Kannada inscription at Soladevanahalli, Bengaluru, with the help of other researchers associated with the 'Inscriptions 3D Digital Conservation Project'.

**R. YUVARAJU** and Shashikumar Naik scanning a 1262 C.E. Tamil inscription at Talaghattapura. The inscription is a record of the donation of Talaghattapura to some holy men.

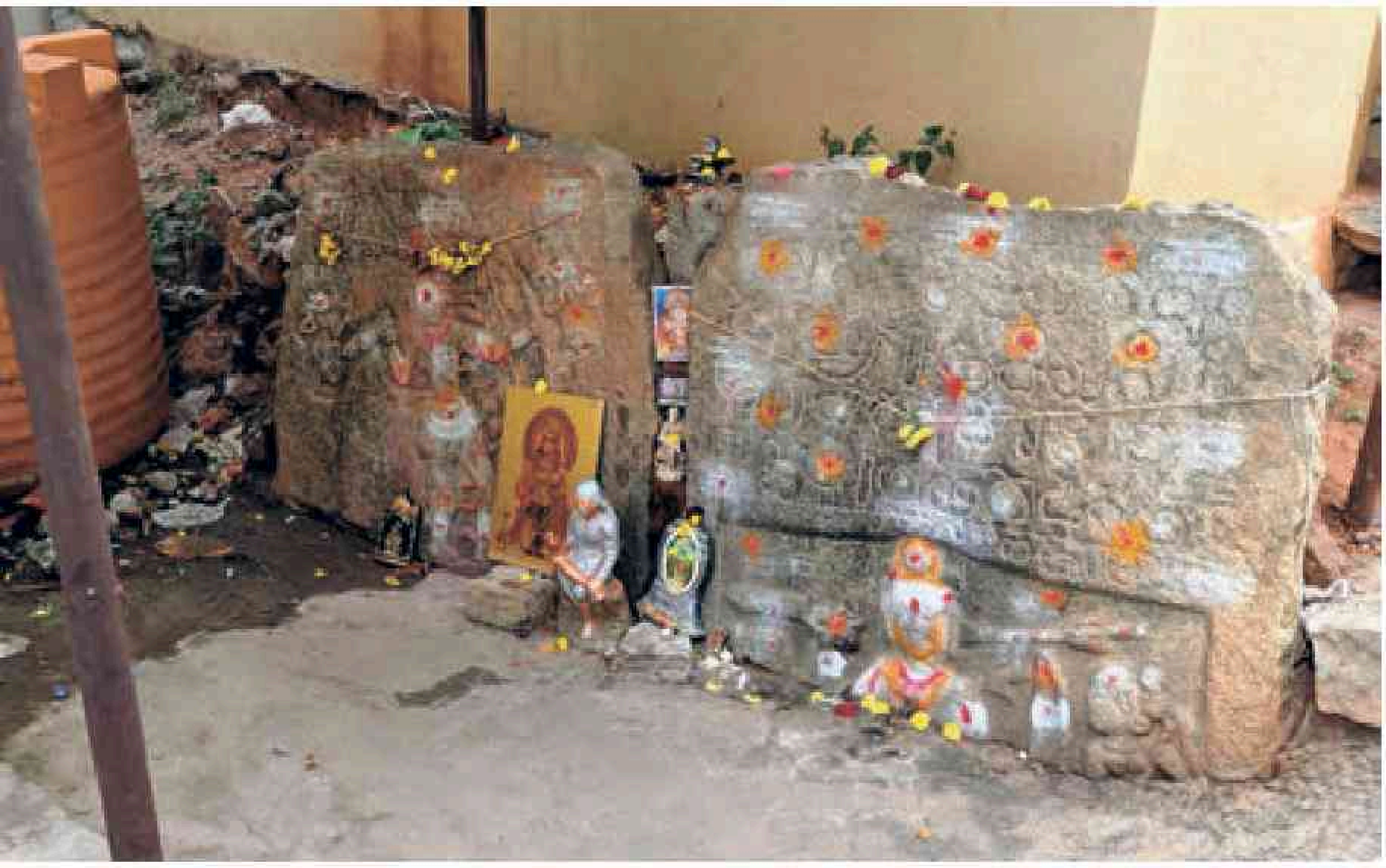
lay scattered across Bengaluru. His foray into the field can be deemed to be a continuation of the work begun at the end of the 19th century by Benjamin Lewis Rice, the Englishman who as Director of the Archaeological Department of the Mysore princely state brought out 12 pioneering volumes on the epigraphical resources of the Mysore region titled *Epigraphic Carnatica*. Rice's ninth volume was published in 1905 and contained inscriptions found in Bangalore.

### STUMBLING UPON LOCATIONAL CLUE

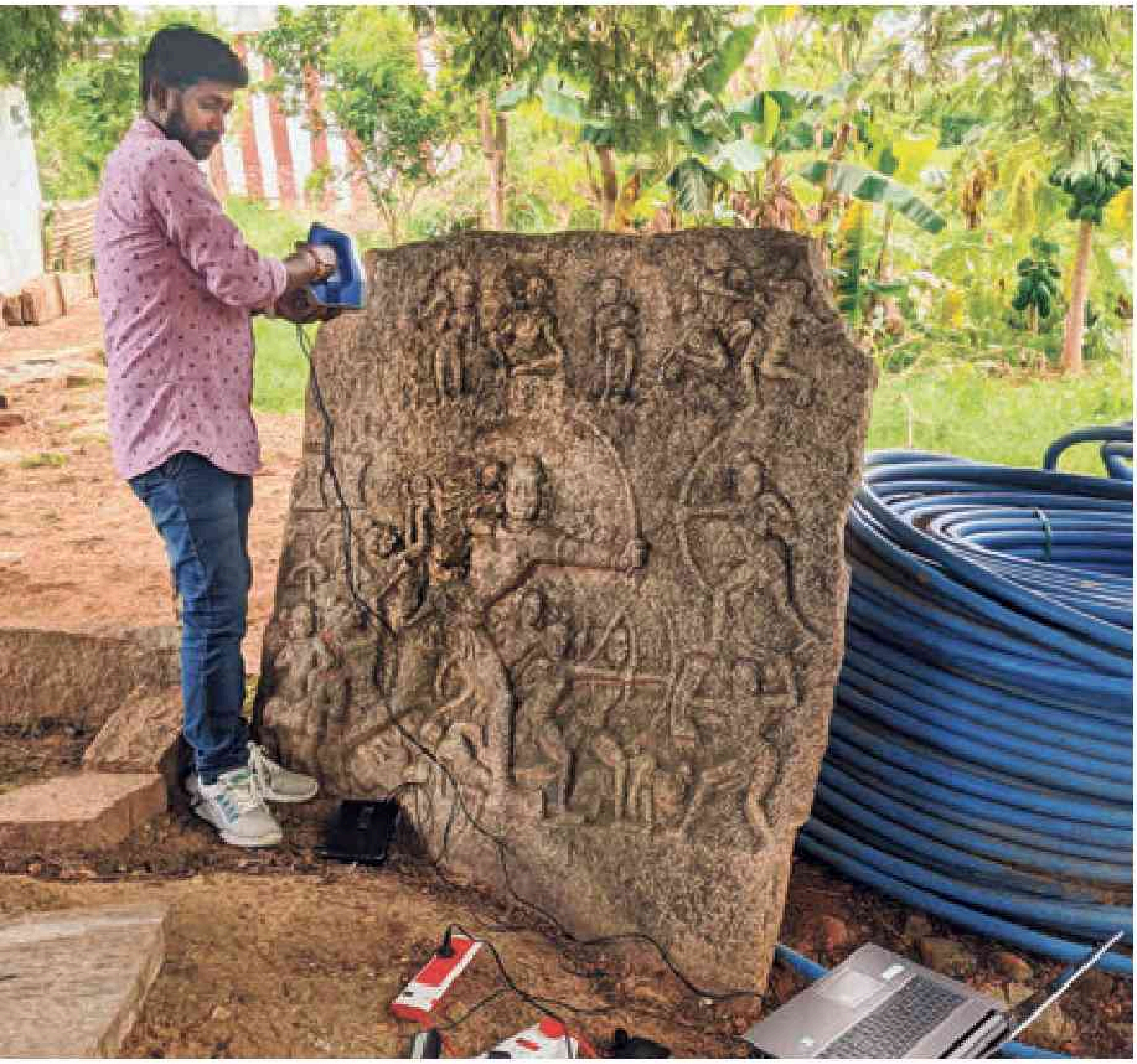
In 2017, while riffling through the pages of this volume, Udaya Kumar stumbled upon the mention of a 14th century inscription in Ketamaranahalli village. "I am a hardcore Bengalurean, and having grown up in Rajajinagar, I knew that this locality was originally known as Ketamaranahalli. I was blown away when I found out that the place that I had grown up in had a 700-year-old history," he said, explaining his journey towards becoming the 'Inscriptions Man' of Bengaluru. Implicit in Udaya Kumar's reaction was the astonishment that the history of Bengaluru was much older than the 16th century that it was conventionally thought to have begun in.

Udaya Kumar searched hard for the crucial stone whose locational clue was that it was near a lake at Ketamaranahalli. The urban expansion of Bengaluru had at some point in the past 112 years encroached upon the lake, and the inscription stones were lost in the process. However, Udaya Kumar got lucky in August 2017 when he found two inscription stones at Dasarahalli, another village-turned-urban sprawl, which found mention in Rice's volume. In the photographs taken at the time, the two broad and squat stones, which Rice's volume had dated to the 11th and 13th centuries (these are inscription nos. 38 and 39 in the ninth volume), lie between two houses amid garbage and debris. The stones are *veeragallus*, or hero stones, erected to mark the martyrdom of local heroes. In one of the stones, the etchings show a valorous man, the hero presumably, standing with his sword held high even as several arrows have pierced his body and two angels hover at his flanks.

Udaya Kumar's excitement at finding those stones is palpable. "Imagine touching this stone and tracing its etchings in chalk that were written by a person 1,300 years ago. This holy stone was lying in a garbage dump!" After this "rediscovery", Udaya Kumar started hunting for stone inscriptions within the urban limits of Bengaluru. Counting the inscriptions documented by Rice

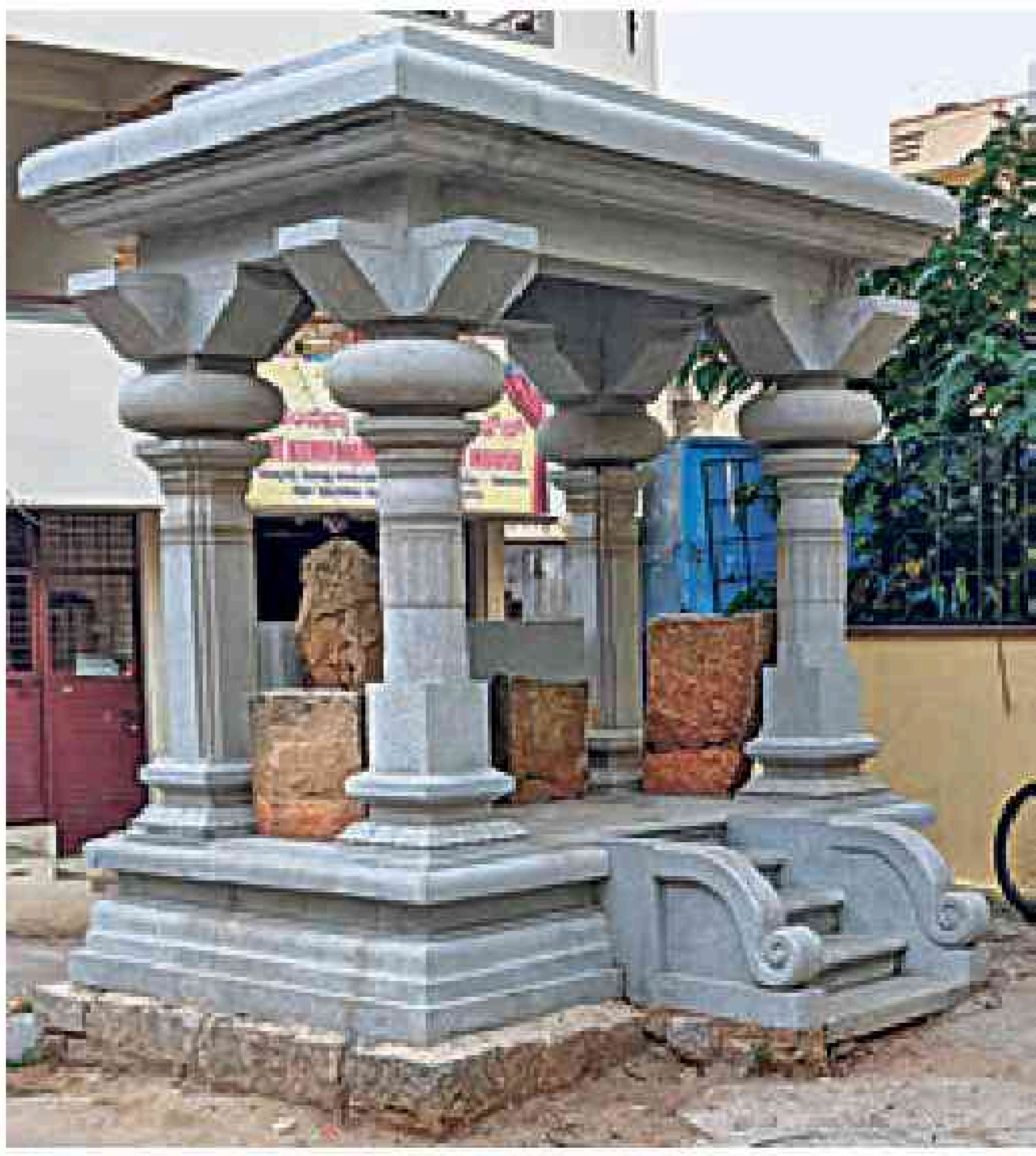


**HERO STONES** belonging to the 8th and 10th centuries at Dasarahalli.



**YUVARAJU** scanning a 10th century hero stone at Byrasandra-Agara.

and later scholars, Udaya Kumar said there were 175 stone inscriptions, of which he managed to trace 110. Some of these inscriptions record the culture, religion and language of the people who lived in the environs of Bengaluru between the 8th and 17th centuries. Udaya Kumar says that around half of these stones record donations made to local temples, while the rest are *veeragallus* or chronicles of lakes, villages and buildings. Most of the inscriptions are in *Halegannada* and some of them are in Telugu and Tamil.



**A CROWD-FUNDED** mantapa harking back to the Ganga dynasty that was designed by Bengaluru-based architect Yashaswini Sharma houses the 8th century Hebbal-Kittayya hero stone.

During his search for the elusive inscriptions, Udaya Kumar, to his dismay, found one inscribed stone belonging to the 8th century in a gutter with fresh *paan* stains on it and a pushcart vendor upending dirty water on it. A 14th century stone lay near a tree and was being used like a countertop to keep clumps of plantain leaves.

"There are scores of examples of this [of shocking neglect]," said Udaya Kumar showing photographs of various sites. Of the 110 inscriptions located in Bengaluru, Udaya Kumar says, 30 were found in dumps. Twenty-eight stones have been relocated to relatively safer spaces in the same vicinity.

While senior officials at the State Archaeological Department were sympathetic to Udaya Kumar's efforts, they could not offer any financial assistance. But this did not deter Udaya Kumar as he went ahead with his mission, gathering help and support from friends and well-wishers. Udaya Kumar and his friend Vinay Kumar (who was a crucial part of the early phase of the project) started a Facebook public group called "Inscription Stones of Bengaluru", which has more than 20,000 members now. An informative session was organised at the Government Museum in Bengaluru towards the end of 2017 while the General Post Office in the city issued a Special Cover on the Inscription Stones of Bengaluru. As part of Udaya Kumar's efforts to preserve local heritage, funds to the tune of Rs.25 lakh were crowdsourced. A mantapa, designed by the architect Yashaswini Sharma, was built in Hebbal in January 2020 and a *veeragallu* from circa 750 was re-erected there.

Apart from preserving these inscriptions, Udaya Kumar and Vinay Kumar began looking at technological solutions and came up with the method of digitally scanning the stone inscriptions three dimensionally so that they would be preserved for posterity even if they happened to be destroyed or damaged. "The inscriptions will not last forever. They could be destroyed by accidents and over time there will be natural erosion due to heat, rain and atmospheric air," Udaya Kumar said, explaining the rationale behind finding a permanent solution.

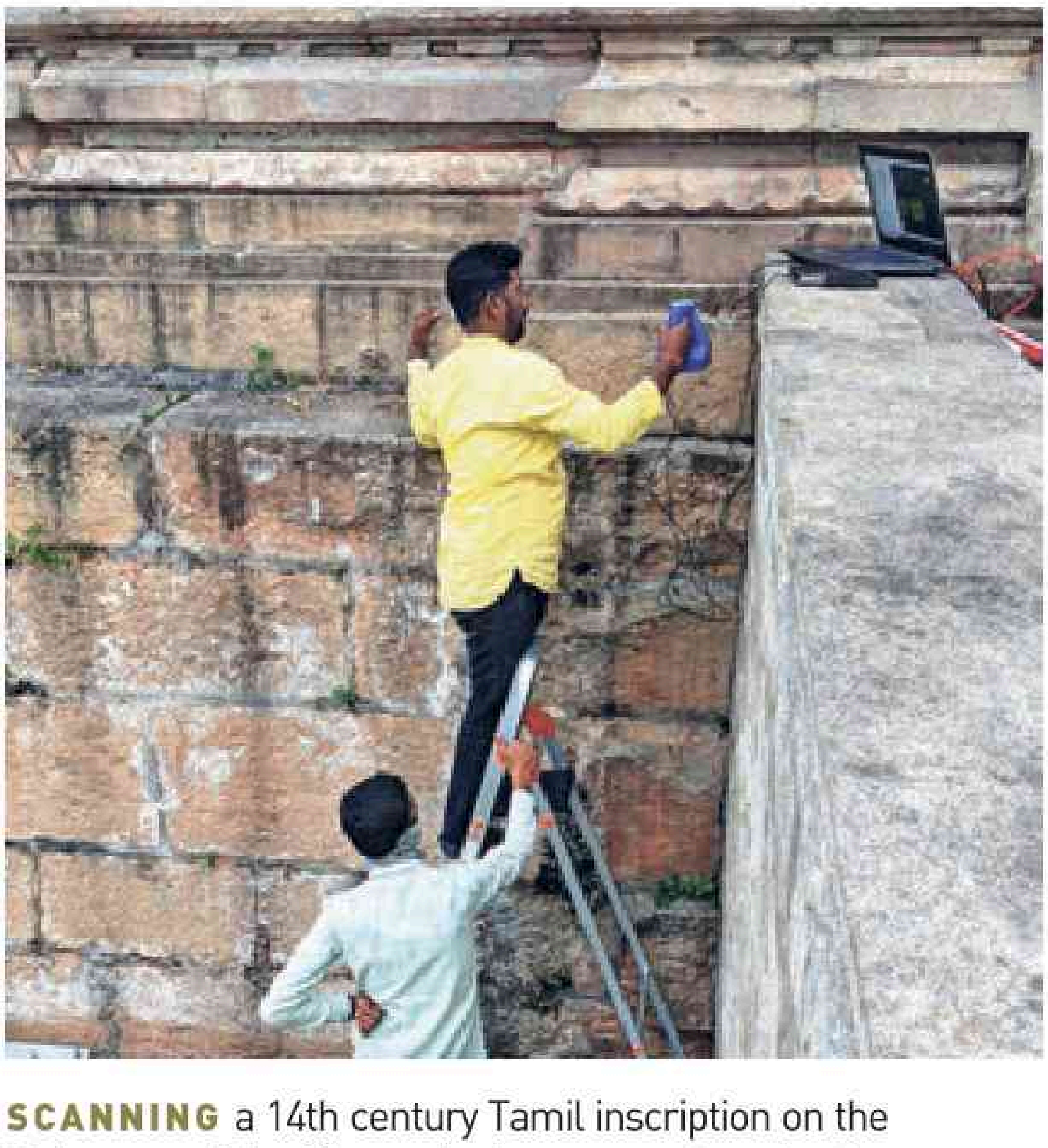
Udaya Kumar is an engineer who graduated from the Indian Institute of Technology Madras and has vast experience in the corporate sector. He calls himself a "citizen historian". Safeguarding these slices of history is important to him.

"Heritage and history are the stepping stones for future successes and if we waste away our heritage, we can never become a developed nation," he said.

By 2020, Udaya Kumar's work began to be noticed widely and commended in Bengaluru. He was often invited to address public forums in

**YUVARAJU** and M.G. Byrappa scanning a 1495 C.E. Kannada inscription at Gongadipura, Bengaluru. The inscription records the gift of Gongadipura village to some Brahmins and the conversion of the village into an Agrahara.

**THE TEAM** scanning a 14th century stone pillar of a mantapa at the Someshwara temple on the Belur campus of the National Aerospace Laboratories.



**SCANNING** a 14th century Tamil inscription on the Rajgopura of the Champakadamswamy temple at Bannerghatta.

**THE INSCRIPTIONS** 3D Digital Conservation Project research team at its office in the Mythic Society building in Bengaluru.

the city to share his experience of preserving inscription stones. By then, Udaya Kumar and his friends had discovered several stones and honed their scanning technique, but the high cost of digitally scanning the inscriptions slowed their progress. In January 2021, Mythic Society, a public institution dedicated to Indic studies founded in 1909, stepped in to support Udaya Kumar by sanctioning a grant of around Rs.2 crore for a three-year project.

Udaya Kumar immediately recruited four young researchers to assist him, all except one doctorates in local history with the ability to read *Halegannada*, and the team moved into the premises of Mythic Society. Udaya Kumar himself, while steering the project, has refused to take a salary and works in an honorary capacity because he says this is his way of "giving back to the city that has given me life". The support of Mythic Society has also meant that Udaya Kumar, who had hitherto focussed on stones within Bengaluru, has expanded his area of work to incorporate 1,500 inscriptions found in Bengaluru Urban, Bengaluru Rural and Ramanagara districts.

While fieldwork is one part of the project, image processing is the second and more arduous component. This was visible when *Frontline* visited the team's office located in an annexe of the Mythic Society building in central Bengaluru. The four researchers, Yuvaraju, Madhusudhan, M.G. Byrappa and K.C. Shashikumar Naik, were seated in front of tall computers on which they were studying scanned images. As Shashikumar Naik twisted and rotated the 3D scanned image of a 11th century inscription stone on a computer's screen, not only did the script become recognisable but fine details of the stone also emerged. The scanned images are shared with epigraphists who vet the inscriptions, transliterations and translations.

The computers, with advanced processing capacities, have been named creatively. They bear the names of local heroes mentioned in some of the inscription stones. They are Kittayya (the name mentioned in an 8th century *veeragallu* found in Hebbal), Mareya (referred to in another 8th century inscription stone found in Whitefield), Sambayya (after the hero named in a 10th century stone found in Krishnarajapuram) and Savinirmadi (a woman named in a 10th century inscription stone now safeguarded at the Government Museum).

A prominent note was placed in the computer room. Titled "Philosophy of Our Articles", it listed "Writing Style Guidelines". This note served as a handy reference for the third component of the project, which is the production of a high-quality bilingual publication in English and Kannada on the history of neighbourhoods. The first issue, on Singapura, was published in November 2021, while Jakkur was profiled in December. The English version of the Singapura issue consists of 80 pages and is a valuable compendium of the inscriptions of the area. (This issue, which is licensed under Creative Commons, can be downloaded at https://bit.ly/Bengaluru_Itihaasa_Vaibhava_Singapura_English). Along with this, the inscriptions are analysed and interpreted whereby a history of the neighbourhood is constructed from scratch.

S.K. Aruni, the Bengaluru-based Deputy Director of the Indian Council of Historical Research, who is a strong votary of the inscriptions project, told *Frontline*, "This is a highly innovative idea and should be emulated in other expanding cities all over India so that inscription stones are not lost to rapid urban development. This 3D scanning is different from regular scanning because even if the original stone is lost, future generations can perceive and feel the original and even print a model. This project is also important because errors made in past readings of these inscriptions can be corrected allowing us to reinterpret our history." Indeed, details revealed in the 3D scans showed that some inscriptions were incompletely or wrongfully recorded in Rice's volume. Apart from reverifying the inscriptions, Udaya Kumar and his team have discovered around 30 inscriptions that have not been documented by any scholar in the past. They are certain that this number will increase as the project work intensifies.

### ATTITUDINAL SHIFT

Udaya Kumar has noticed a major attitudinal shift among historians and epigraphists who were sceptical of his work earlier. People from other cities in India have approached Udaya Kumar with a request to scan inscription stones in their areas, but he feels the work must be undertaken by local history enthusiasts. "I say to these people: You buy the machine, find a guy to do it and we'll train him. The scanning cost of each stone works out to Rs.3,000. The money is immaterial when the idea is to preserve a 1,000-year-old heritage," he says.

Udaya Kumar's original concept of preserving local history that is threatened by untrammelled development needs to be emulated. ☐

# Lingering melody

## Lata Mangeshkar (1929-2022) enthralled music lovers across eras and leaves behind a treasure trove of songs that will resonate with generations to come.

BY **ZIYA US SALAM**

NAWAB SHARIQ lived in Matia Mahal, a few steps from the historic Jama Masjid in Delhi. His luxurious, old-world lifestyle, with its niceties, made him the object of much admiration, and not a little curiosity, in the 1970s. Back in 1972, day and night he would listen to the song 'Mausam hai ashiqana' and hum along with the lines: 'Din ho gaye hain zaalim, raatein hain qaatilana.' Every Thursday, the much-pampered nawab would get into his tonga (horse carriage), which would take him from the carpeted streets of Matia Mahal, named after a Mughal princess, to Jagat cinema, a few hundred metres down the road, which screened Kamal Amrohi's masterpiece, *Pakeezah*. At the cinema, he would alight from the tonga and walk into the box section, making sure not to make eye contact with other filmgoers at the hall. The women of his family followed in his trail to watch the film in the privacy of the small family box at the cinema. The nawab, though, never watched the complete film. He had fallen in love with Lata Mangeshkar's 'Mausam hai aashiqana'. When she sang, his heart missed a beat and his mind wandered elsewhere. Once the song was over, the nawab would leave the hall, only to come back the next Thursday, at the same time, for the same show and the same film. Such were the eccentricities of the nawab

THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

**JANUARY 16, 1994:** Rendering the theme song of the National Games' opening ceremony in Pune.

PTI

**LATA MANGESHKAR** (second from left), flanked by sister Usha Mangeshkar and brother Hridaynath Mangeshkar, along with sisters Asha Bhosle and Meena Khadikar, at Hridaynath's birthday celebrations in Mumbai on October 27, 2004.

and such was the unalloyed delight of listening to Lata Mangeshkar rendering a song about the season of love.

As for *Pakeezah*, it had songs and songlets to warm the hearts of all. It was the last film of the music director Ghulam Mohammed, who passed away in 1968 in abject penury, four years before the film's release in 1972. Naushad, the mercurial genius, stepped in to provide the background score and insisted that three of the songs, including 'Mausam hai aashiqana', needed reinventing by him, which practically made them his tunes.

The film had commenced in 1956, but a combination of erratic financing, lopsided shooting schedules, the director's personal problems and the deteriorating health of Meena Kumari, the female lead, delayed it inordinately before everyone involved pooled their energies in 1968 to revive the project. Much of the film had to be reshot for freshness and some songs needed reinventing to go with the colour film technology in vogue by then. Even Meena Kumari's famous "Aapke paon dekhe" sequence and the songs 'Chalo dildar chalo' and 'Teere nazar dekhenge' had to be enacted by Padma Khanna, a body double, as the heroine had fallen seriously ill.

What remained fresh and untouched was the magic of Lata Mangeshkar. *Pakeezah*, but for the involvement of Mohammed Rafi in 'Chalo dildar chalo', was Lata's baby—beautiful, melodious, soothing.

## FIRST SUCCESS

Incidentally, a little more than two decades before *Pakeezah*, in 1949, Kamal Amrohi gave Lata Mangeshkar her first taste of success with *Mahal*, a film better remembered for the magic of the music director Khemchand Prakash and Lata's timeless song 'Aayega aanewala', her first genuine hit in the film industry. Back then, the technology for film song recording was at best elementary—songs were sung directly for the film when it was being shot. For 'Aayega aanewala', Lata Mangeshkar sang at Prakash Studios in Bombay while the film's heroine Madhubala waited outside. The song had a long antara that went 'Aayega...aayega'. For this portion, Lata stood well behind the microphone. As she sang the couplet, she took small steps towards the microphone to give listeners the impression of a voice coming from a distance. In the early stages of her career, Khemchand Prakash, along with Anil Biswas, was among the few music directors who showed confidence in her.

In that song, Lata Mangeshkar got the pronunciation of a difficult Urdu word, 'baghair' (without), just right. This perfection came from her training under a maulvi at home to improve her Urdu diction. The maulvi was a well-read man. Even as he taught her the Urdu alphabet, he introduced her to the poetry of Mirza Ghalib, Mohammed Zauq and Mir Taqi Mir. Not out of her teens yet, Lata Mangeshkar devoured the best of Urdu poetry, understood the nuances of each word and went on to prove wrong all the doubting Thomases who thought a Marathi girl's Urdu diction could not be flawless. As for Khemchand Prakash, the song became his passport to lasting fame, although his royalty dues of some Rs.50 lakh remained unpaid for long.

THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

**SHARING** a lighter moment with sister Asha Bhosle.

With Lata Mangeshkar, each song became an occasion. Lyricists and music directors longed to work with her, and many writers even tweaked their script to accommodate a song by her. For instance, Gulzar's *Khamoshi* in 1969, for which he penned the dialogue and lyrics. The film had an unforgettable song, 'Humne dekhi hai in ankhon ki mahakti khushboo', sung by Lata Mangeshkar. Initially, she was not supposed to sing the song as the music director Hemant Kumar wanted a male artist to sing it in praise of his lady love. "How can a man's eyes radiate 'mahakti khushboo'?" Hemant Kumar argued. The song was all about a woman's beauty, her eyes, her whispering silences. Gulzar, though, wanted no one else but Lata Mangeshkar to sing it. So, he came up with an idea: the female actor would sing it on radio and the song would be picturised in a recording studio. Such were the lengths Gulzar went to so that Lata Mangeshkar would sing the song he had penned with much love. It was also the song he would later hum to his real-life lady love, Raakhee Gulzar.

Incidentally, Lata Mangeshkar made a significant contribution to Gulzar's career in the early days. She had sung his first song, 'Mora gora ang laile', in Bimal Roy's *Bandini* in 1963. He took five days to write the song, but the film's music director, S.D. Burman, prevented him from reciting it to Bimal Roy because he thought Gulzar's diction would ruin it. (Gulzar was a struggling poet then, having begun his career working in a garage). Bimal Roy liked the lyrics and Nutan sang it on screen, while Lata Mangeshkar's singing immortalised it.

There was this inscrutable joy that Lata Mangeshkar brought to singing. In Mehboob Khan's 1949 film *Andaz*, starring Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Nargis, she brought the house down with her rendition of Naushad's 'Uthhaye ja unke sitam' based on the raga Kedar. Three years later, in *Baiju Bawra*, a showcase of Mohammed Rafi's versatile genius, she managed to leave her own indelible impression with 'Bachpan ki mohabbat ko dil se na juda karna', based on the raga Maand. Incidentally, she recorded the duet 'Tu Ganga ki mauj' with Rafi even while running a high temperature.

Lata Mangeshkar really came into her own under Naushad's baton in K. Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* in 1960. In 'Pyar kiya to darna kya' and 'Mohabbat ki jhoothi kahani pe roye', both based on the raga Darbari, and 'Mohe panghat pe Nandlal chhed gayo re', based on the raga Gaara, she proved that no one was her equal when it came to classicism. In retrospect, her songs under C. Ramchandra's baton in *Anarkali* (1953), with beauties such as 'Mujhse mat pooch' and 'Aaja ab toh aaja', the latter based on Marathi bhavgeet, were just a dress rehearsal for *Mughal-e-Azam*, a film like no other in the annals of Hindi cinema. The film has an underappreciated Lata gem, 'Ae ishq ye sab duniyawale', which was faintly reminiscent of Talat Mahmood's 'Mohabbat hi jo na samjhe woh zalim pyar kya jaane' in V. Shantaram's *Parchhain* (1952).

Incidentally, Naushad was not K. Asif's first choice for the film. The director had initially signed Pandit Govindram, then changed his mind, opting for Ghulam Hyder, before choosing Anil Biswas for the film. But he did not stick with even Anil Biswas, a freedom fighter who gave us 'Door hato ae duniyawalon, Hindustan hamara hai'. (Lata Mangeshkar sang at least a hundred solos for him in her career.)

As legend has it, one evening, as Naushad was busy honing his skills on the harmonium at home, K. Asif entered his room and virtually demanded that he compose the score for *Mughal-e-Azam*. When Naushad paid no attention, he threw a wad of notes in front of him. The skilful music director would have none of it, and a gust of wind blew the notes away. Naushad was ultimately persuaded by his wife to do the film. And what a score it was.

Naushad matched Asif's zeal for perfection, and Lata Mangeshkar gave him company every step of the way. For the love anthem 'Pyar kiya to darna kya', Naushad used eight sitars, sitar and pakhawaj, and then asked Lata Mangeshkar to sing the song without any accompaniment. He recorded her voice on four different soundtracks, paying attention to details of distance from the microphone, proximity, hollowness, and so on, before transferring the four voices to the original soundtrack. The film originally had 20 songs, but half of them were dropped, including 'Husn ki baraat chali', a rare number where Lata Mangeshkar sang with Shamshad Begum and Mubarak Begum.

*Mughal-e-Azam*, a film whose prints arrived on the back of an elephant at the time of its release, rode its way into the hearts of Hindi film lovers, and Lata Mangeshkar's 'Pyar kiya to darna kya' remained easily the most defiant expression of love for all time to come, her vocal chords complementing Naushad's music and Madhubala's expressions.

Incidentally, though brilliant, this song was not her favourite from the film. That honour went to 'Bekas par karam kijiye sarkar-e-Madina', a difficult song based on the raga Kedar.

### EACH SONG AN EVENT

Every other song of Lata Mangeshkar became an event in itself. For instance, Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* had a unique song, 'Duniya mein hum aaye hain', penned by Shakeel Badayuni. Naushad brought together the three Mangeshkar sisters, Lata, Meena Khadikar and Usha, for the song. In a career spanning seven decades, there were only a handful of songs that Lata Mangeshkar sang with her sisters. The *Mother India* song was a rare piece that united Meena, who tasted greater success in Marathi cinema than in Hindi cinema, with her more illustrious sister.

Except for Asha Bhosle, with whom she sang 92 duets, Lata Mangeshkar worked only occasionally with her sisters Meena and Usha and her brother, Hridaynath. She produced *Lekin* for which her brother composed the music. Both Lata and Hridyanath won National Awards for the song 'Yaara seeli seeli'.

A few years ago, Meena Khadikar penned a memoir in Marathi that was released in Hindi as *Didi Aur Main*, with a translation by Ambarish Mishra. It was a tribute to the eldest sister whom she regarded more as a mother and a friend although Lata Mangeshkar was only two years older than her.

Life with Meena always moved on an even keel: as children the two sisters would sneak out to watch films such as *Sant Tukaram* and K.L. Saigal's *Devdas* and then enact them at home, with Lata playing Devdas and Meena playing Paro. Both Usha and Asha were considered too young to play Chandramukhi.

Their father, Dinanath Mangeshkar, was a singer, stage actor and producer who ran his own theatre company. He had played the role of Latika, a free-spirited woman, in the play *Bhav Bandhan*. Legend has it that Lata Mangeshkar was named after that character. Another story goes that she was initially named Hridaya but called Lata by her father for a deeply personal reason. Dinanath had first married a woman named Narmada with whom he had a daughter named Lata. Neither Narmada nor Lata survived for long, and Dinanath married Narmada's younger sister Shevanti. When Shevanti gave birth to their first child, the couple decided to call her Lata, a little after she was born.

To the dismay of Dinanath, who laid much stock by classical music, Lata Mangeshkar would often want to watch films and sing songs from them, her favourite being Saigal and his number 'Ek bangala bane nyara'. One day, Dinanath heard her correcting one of his students. Lata was then only five or six. He then took her under his wing, and Lata started her early lessons, preferring to sing bandish (a melodic composition) but not paying as much attention to sargam (singing of notes). When she was only nine years old, she sang on stage for the first time. She was then travelling with her father's theatre company. She sang the raga Khambavati and a couple of Marathi songs before falling asleep on her father's lap on stage.

### EARLY DAYS

Dinanath passed away early, leaving behind five children, and Lata Mangeshkar at 12 was the eldest. She took on the responsibility of looking after her siblings even before her father's pyre was lit. Soon, she started working in Marathi films and then came Hindi films. Though not keen on acting, she did work in eight films, beginning in 1942 with *Pahili Mangalagaur*. Then came her first Hindi song, 'Hindustan ke logon ab

PTI

**WITH** the cricketer Sachin Tendulkar at a function in Mumbai on March 9, 2014.

THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

**MAY 7, 1990:** Receiving the Dadasaheb Phalke award from President R. Venkataraman.

to mujh ko pehchano', in 1943 in *Gajabhau*, a Marathi film.

She continued her training in classical music, becoming a disciple of Ustad Aman Ali Khan Bhendibazaarwale. The first raga he taught her was Hamsadhwani, which came in handy a few years later when she sang 'Jaa tose nahin bolun Kanhaiya' with Manna Dey for the music director Salil Chowdhury in *Parivar*. It was based on Hamsadhwani, and Lata was able to hold her own before Manna Dey, widely regarded as the most proficient among playback singers with a classical music background.

Even as she continued to train, first under Ustad Aman Ali Khan and then under Ustad Amanat Khan Devaswale, Lata Mangeshkar's career as a playback singer began to blossom. She worked with Master Ghulam Haider and then Khemchand Prakash, Ghulam Mohammed and soon the who's who of film music, such as S.D. Burman, Shanker-Jaikishan, C. Ramchandra, Madan Mohan, Hemant Kumar, Jaidev and Khayyam. The legendary Bade Ghulam Ali Khan once heard her song 'Yeh zindagi usi ki hai' from *Anarkali* and is known to have remarked: *"Kambakht, kabhi besuri nahi hoti"* (The blessed girl is never out of tune). She sang along with male playback legends such as Mukesh, Kishore Kumar and Mohammed Rafi. Through Mukesh, she met Naushad. Soon, she was singing for three films a day. Her songs were everywhere. A film without her songs was a rarity.

But the success also bred controversy.

One day, Lata realised that all her hard work got her recognition only within the industry—the common filmgoer mistakenly thought her songs were actually sung by the characters played by actors in the films because audio records did not credit the playback singers. For instance, the records of *Mahal* credited Kamini (Madhubala's name in the film) for singing 'Aayega aanewala'. Lata Mangeshkar fought for recognition. Finally, playback singers were given recognition, and the discs of films such as *Barsaat* and *Andaz* carried her name as also those of co-singers. Then films started carrying the names of playback singers on the screen too. It was a major victory for visibility.

### RIFTS AND RIVALRIES

On the same lines was her fight with the music directors Shanker-Jaikishan. It so happened that Shanker-Jaikishan had won the Filmfare Award for Best Music for the film *Chori Chori*. Jaikishan approached Lata Mangeshkar to sing 'Rasik balma' from the film at the award function. She refused, saying that they, not her, had got the award. She insisted that she would come only when *Filmfare* introduced awards for the best playback singers too, and not just for best music.

Lata Mangeshkar's relationship with her contemporary singers and music directors was not always as smooth or as fun as the one with her sister Meena or as easy as the victory in the playback recognition case. She was not on speaking terms with Asha Bhosale for many years as Asha got married very young—to Ganpatrao Bhosle, a ration inspector in the neighbourhood—and remained cut off from her eldest sister until the birth of her third child. There were also whispers about their professional rivalry, with some alleging that Lata was like a banyan tree who did not allow other talents to grow under her shadow.

However, thanks to her versatility and a voice quite dissimilar to Lata's, Asha Bhosle, who received tremendous support from the music director O.P. Nayyar, managed to create her own formidable following in the industry. The songs full of zest and energy, the foot-tapping or sensuous numbers all came to Asha Bhosle, while the soft romantic ones or those talking of angst or the pain of parting went to the elder sister. The best proof came in director K. Viswanath's *Sanjog* in the mid 1980s. While Lata sang the unforgettable 'Zu zu zu, Yashodha ka Nandlala', Asha sang 'Dil kya chahe, main kya chahoon'; the former was all about a mother's love for her child, while the latter was a romantic song for a young couple. Lata's song was played in public transport buses and paan shops, while Asha's song was heard only in private environs. On occasions when the two singers came together, as in 'Man kyun behka re behka' in *Utsav*, the result was unforgettable.

Lata Mangeshkar was not on speaking terms with S.D. Burman for a good five years. She had sung a song for him for *Miss India*. The director found the song "too soft" and asked her to record it again. Lata Mangeshkar agreed, but as she was busy, she could not find time for it. The incident led to a lot of heartburn. The two came together for Bimal Roy's *Bandini* for which she sang 'Mora gora ang laile'.

THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

**WITH MUSIC COMPOSER** Madan Mohan.

Her rift with Rafi is well documented. Sometime in the 1960s, Lata Mangeshkar asked for royalties from music companies for the songs she sang. Rafi, and indeed Asha Bhosle too, were of the opinion that once a song had been recorded and they were paid by the producer, the matter ended. But Lata Mangeshkar did not agree, and for four years between 1963 and 1967, she did not sing with Rafi. Her absence paved the way for the rise of Suman Kalyanpur, who carved out a niche for herself singing opposite Rafi. Later, in the 1970s, Lata Mangeshkar reportedly had problems working with music directors who worked with Hemlata, who shot to fame with songs of *Ankhiyon Ke Jharokhon Se* and *Nadiya Ke Paar*.

A well-decorated artiste who was a recipient of both the Bharat Ratna and the Dadasaheb Phalke award, apart from innumerable other awards, Lata Mangeshkar was also a songbird of the changing times. Back in the 1960s, when Indo-Chinese tensions were at their peak, she sang Kavi Pradeep's 'Ae mere watan ke logon'. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was reduced to tears on listening to her live. In the 1950s and 1960s, she sang in many patriotic films, which talked of India's shared past, like *Taj Mahal*, and others that espoused the cause of Nehruvian socialism, like *Mother India*.

By the late 1980s and certainly the early 1990s, the sociopolitical atmosphere of the country had changed. Nehru was long gone. The Babri Masjid-Ramjanambhoomi controversy was raging and senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader L.K. Advani was on his rath yatra to build a temple at the exact venue of the mosque in Ayodhya. Lata Mangeshkar recorded a bhajan and sent it to Advani for his rath yatra.

Advani's adventure caused riots in many places and more than 500 people died, before the mosque was demolished. Around the same time, she also talked with pride about V.D. Savarkar and later openly supported the rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. It hurt many of her fans.

Simultaneously, like millions of fellow Indians, she retained her love for cricket. She understood the intricacies of the game and was happy to greet Sachin Tendulkar on a century or, in earlier years, Sunil Gavaskar and Kapil Dev. A rare artiste who kept in touch with the world beyond her area of expertise, she was often seen at cricket events and even watched some matches abroad. Once, when Pakistani fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar spoke to her, she suggested that he should call her 'Maa'. It was a poignant moment as Lata remained single all her life.

## ENDURING LEGACY

However, politics, cricket and allegations of one-upmanship with her contemporaries do not define Lata Mangeshkar. What she will be remembered for is the treasure trove of songs she left behind for millions of fans in 36 languages, her sweet voice, and memories of her gentle ways. When she sang for Gulzar for the first time in *Bandini* in 1963, she would not have realised that the ace lyricist would also give her a song that would be played on her departure from the mortal world. It came in the form of 'Naam gum jayega, chehra yeh badal jayega, meri awaaz his pehchan hai, gar yaad rahe'. Sung as a duet with Bhupinder Singh for the film *Kinara* in 1977, it is remembered to date as a Lata Mangeshkar song, much like thousands of other songs. Her voice was her fortune.

There was only one Lata Mangeshkar—Bharat's ratna. □

# Records of resistance

As Chile looks forward to a hopeful future under the recently elected socialist President Gabriel Boric, a review of the large body of films that has come into existence in the past three decades examining the period of the dictatorship and its aftermath in the country. BY **VIDYARTHY CHATTERJEE**

"ONLY if you are able to recognise yourself in the past is it possible to come to terms with the present. Personally, I have always believed that a country which does not have a past, can have neither a present nor a future," wrote Miguel Littin, the distinguished Chilean film-maker. The recent election of the young socialist leader Gabriel Boric as President of Chile has shown that the sins of the dictatorship years (1973-1990) have not been entirely forgotten by the Chilean people, especially the young and the deprived. Clearly, the present verdict is meant to make the present safe and to visualise the future with necessary confidence. The element of poetic justice in Boric's election is hard to miss. Salvador Allende Gossens, the world's first freely elected Marxist head of state who was brought down in a coup sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency and executed by the Chilean army headed by Augusto Pinochet Duarte, must be shaking his head in his grave in the manner he did when on earlier occasions Michelle Bachelet was elected President. Bachelet's father was among the thousands of *Allendistas* (meaning followers or supporters of the slain president) who were eliminated for opposing the coup.

In the past 30 years, a body of films has come into existence examining the period of the dictatorship and its aftermath. Film—both documentary and drama—played an important role in letting the world know about Pinochet's atrocities against the country's dissenters who would mock at the general's exhortations to his supporters to uphold "God, nation and family". In this connection, two films that immediately come to mind are the documentarist Patricio Guzman's *La Battala de Chile* (The Battle of Chile) and Miguel Littin's *El Chacal de Nahueltoro* (The Jackal of Nahueltoro), which paved the way for a host of 'coup' films. *El Chacal* is an incisive criticism of social conditions in Latin America in general and Chile in particular. Littin employed a documentary style and grainy images married to incidental sounds to expose the fascist system that produces people like the so-called "Jackal", an unlettered, poor, and emotionally unstable young man who kills his wife and several children in a fit of drunken fury.

The incident actually happened in the backward interior of the country where people worsen their poverty by drowning themselves in alcohol. The trajectory of the man's life and death serves as an unsettling study in irony and the workings of power structures, including the state, the judiciary, the church and the media. The inadvertent murderer, having been swiftly tracked down, was given his first hair-cut, his first decent meals, his first lessons in the Spanish alphabet under the care of a chaplain—and then, when he seemed somewhat fit to lead a normal life in society, sentenced to death and shot. The name, "Jackal" was given to the man by the media and

**THE NEWLY ELECTED** President Gabriel Boric before the presentation of his Cabinet in Santiago on January 21.

picked up in no time by a society so structured by the elites and the middle-classes as to lust for the blood of many an unfortunate never given an opportunity to grow up 'healthy, wealthy and wise'.

In this context, perhaps it will do no harm to recall an incident nearer home which showed how uncannily close human beings are at times to each other despite being separated by great distances. In the summer of 2004, a young man named Dhananjay Chatterjee was hanged at Alipore Central Jail in Calcutta following his conviction for the rape and murder of a teenaged schoolgirl. Judging by the impoverished quality of life to which Dhananjay had been condemned by history, or the manner in which it was ended, he may be said to have been a kinsman of the "Jackal".

Few Chilean film-makers have so consistently and painstakingly probed the individual psyche in a state of laceration caused by the application of tyrannical methods to ensure 'peace and normalcy' as Gonzalo Justiniano. Like Littin or Guzman, Justiniano spent many years in exile outside his country when Pinochet's jackboots held sway. In *Amnesia*, Justiniano does not name the country where the plot is situated, but it is obvious that he is pointing to the nightmare that was Chile once the Popular Unity government headed by Allende had been toppled. Using a distinctive personal style characterised by black humour, Justiniano tackles critical issues like the urge for revenge, or the need to forget and get along.

Justiniano is on record: "*Amnesia* is a film to counter general amnesia.... In today's Chile there are people who don't want to remember anything, starting with those who were involved in dreadful crimes against human rights, up to and including people who demonstrated an enormous lack of political responsibility." It goes without saying that such an attitude of deliberate forgetfulness on the part of not just the upper classes is still to be detected in practically every Latin American country that has known prolonged military intervention. One has only to turn to Brazil, for example, to see how its President, Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters can get away with their praises for military rule in their country during the long period from 1964 to 1985.

**PATRICIO GUZMAN** with a cast member of his film "The Pearl Button".

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Set in the last years of the Pinochet regime, Ricardo Larrain Pineda's *La Frontera* (The Frontier) narrates the experiences of a mathematics teacher arrested for signing a petition for the release of a jailed activist-colleague and sentenced to banishment. Made in 1992 soon after the return of democracy on somewhat faltering feet since Pinochet had agreed to give up power only on the condition that as a life-long Senator he could not be subjected to legal proceedings, *La Frontera* won a Silver Bear in Berlin for artistic excellence combined with political relevance. More avowedly political than some other equally distinguished films constituting what is often referred to as "Coup Cinema"–Chile chapter, *La Frontera* however also exhibited dream-like qualities whilst exploring the theme of exile and estrangement, as indeed of repair and reconstruction. It speaks volumes about the will and determination of a cross-section of the sufferers of the coup, that when the exiled protagonist is given a chance to return to his home in Santiago, he tells a visiting television crew that he wants to stay where he is amongst people of indigenous stock.

Littin, who has been to India more than once to show his films and speak on what led to the coup and what happened after it came to be lifted, made a film with autobiographical undertones in 1993 called *Los naufragos* (Shipwrecked). Aaron, the film's protagonist, returns to his country after 20 years of exile. He is, to quote the director, searching for "a lost nation, a lost understanding, and his lost ties with those who stayed behind". He enters the house where he spent his childhood, negotiating uncertainly but full of yearning, dark corridors and winding staircases. His search for his father and brother is also a search for his inner self; a dark, anxious conversation with himself where memories mingle with hope and expectations, the nature of which is not quite clear.

The collective amnesia that Justiniano speaks of is also dealt with by Littin, whose *El Chacal*, made in the first flush of popular enthusiasm for the ideals of the redoubtable Allende or his closest aides, including the poet Pablo Neruda, was among a bunch of pioneering films that drew the battlelines between progressive forces and conservative elements. In every sense of the expression, the growing conflict, ending in the overthrow of the democratically elected government, was between the local moneyed mafia enjoying the support of the West and the labouring classes living in the *barrios* in tandem with the student community and their mentors.

Silvio Caiozzi's *La luna en el espejo* (The Moon in the Mirror), which was embraced with love and a little sadness by the Venice film festival audience in 1990, was a stunning achievement where art and politics fused seamlessly to produce an excruciating love story with a thematic backdrop of physical and psychological authoritarianism. An indirect indictment of military rule, on the surface, the film is about three people in search of love in a magical harbour of twinkling lights, long shadows and mysterious escalators negotiating with nightly silences. A retired naval officer, Don Arnaldo, lives cooped up in an ancient, rickety house, with his son El Gordo, or Fatty, as his only companion. Reflecting shades of Pinochet and his ubiquitous spies, Don Arnaldo observes everything happening in the house from his sick bed, thanks to a series of mirrors of varied descriptions hanging on the walls. Fatty is obedient and loving, but he is also afraid and desperately wants to be free to love Lucrecia, his neighbour, an attractive widow slightly older than he. The sailor is restless, hallucinating about losing his son to the woman—and therein lies the drama of a family in ferment, symbolic of a nation on the boil.

This writer remembers talking to Caiozzi in Madras (now Chennai) in 1991 after a screening of *La luna*, adapted from a story by Jose Donoso, Chile's representative in the Latin American literary boom that took the world by storm in the second half of the last century. Caiozzi spoke of how highly Donoso was thought of in his own country; of his capacity to invoke images pulsating with passion and smelling of a certain quality of embittered rawness; and his powers of penetration into his times and the assortment of creatures they produced. Despite the feeling that the story takes place anytime during the period of the dictatorship, it is a much older past that is revived in frame after frame—a past that is orthodox, mediocre, often mean, failing to rise above sloth and self-seeking. But, having said that, one cannot escape noticing that the film's dramatic tension grows out of the collision between a patriarch's dictatorial tendencies to keep out the winds of change blowing outside his window and his son's need to break out of the damp-smelling mould to which he has been condemned.

Caiozzi's place in his country's cinema of resistance is furthered by his documentary video called *Fernando is Back Home*, which attests to both his abiding loyalty to the memory of the *desaparacidos* (the disappeared) and his passion for using different cinematic genres to give expression to his role as artist, citizen and human being. Since the return of democracy, unidentified human remains buried without record during the dictatorship have been unearthed at sites across the country. Fernando de Olivares Mori, 27 at the time of his death, vanished one day for his expressed opposition to the junta and was hastily buried. Once the body of the former United Nations employee was disinterred, the procedure for clearly establishing the identity of his remains took another four years. *Fernando is Back Home* opens with the victim's family as they face his remains and listen to a detailed explanation from doctors of the medical verifications that were performed. From their testimony, one learns of the spine-chilling facts of Fernando's end. The forensic surgeon's report to the dead man's widow—broken bones, bullet holes in the skull—tells its own tale of savagery; a tale woven by bemedaled generals and their accomplices to make Chile "safe from Communism".

S. MAHINSHA

**MIGUEL LITTIN,** Chilean film director, a file photograph.

### PATRICIO GUZMAN

But as far as documentaries go, no one has chipped away so patiently, so skillfully, so effectively, and for so long, at the myth of Pinochet as Chile's "saviour against destabilising forces" as Patricio Guzman. Trained in cinema in Franco's Spain, Guzman made five feature-length documentaries during Allende's short time in office, but it is principally for his stupendous *La Battala de Chile* that he will be remembered for as long as film art is valued as a vehicle capable of defrocking impostors and clothing their victims in robes of honour. This epic three-part documentary recounts with chilling conviction the hope and struggle for a better future for the oppressed and the marginalised that rent the Chilean air during the Allende years—and their tragic demise. It has exercised enormous influence all over the world on film-makers and film viewers; and in some rare cases, even on political figures with their head and heart in the right places.

Significantly, in our own country, perhaps no one has expressed his admiration more memorably for *The Battle of Chile* than Anand Patwardhan, pioneer of the New Indian Documentary. Asked to indicate his favourite documentary some years ago by a reputed European film journal, Patwardhan chose *The Battle of Chile*, which is just as well because the Bombay director's own vision of social justice and the process of participation by the popular classes in nation-building along new, daring lines, coincide with many of the signals sent out by this extraordinary celluloid journey into the soul of a potentially rich but actually impoverished nation struggling for change through peaceful democratic methods. In this connection, it may be rightly said that if the wealth generated by Chile's enormous copper reserves, for one thing, were to be judiciously used, the lower classes would have had lesser reason to complain about their economic plight. The statesman that he was, Allende realised this early on and had the copper industry nationalised, thereby packing off the copper multinationals from the United States which had until then been looting Chile with the help of local agents. Asking multinationals like Cerro, Kennecott or Anaconda to leave the country was, in a real sense, akin to Allende signing his own death warrant. The political outcome of the coup is to be traced to that economic legislation, which was passed despite stiff opposition from the far right.

Regarding the attraction he feels for *The Battle of Chile*, Patwardhan is on record thus: "As a student in America in the radical 1970s, I saw many documentaries that began to push me towards film-making as a viable form of social action, but the film that remains etched in my mind is Patricio Guzman's *The Battle of Chile*." Recalling those days when he himself was having a trying time choosing between Gandhi and Marx, the two father-figures who have long since wrestled to possess the imagination and the conscience of many an educated Indian, Patwardhan wrote: "Chile's Salvador Allende was already an icon. I was grappling with the desire to convince my Marxist friends to accept the ethics and strategy of non-violence, while trying to convince my Gandhian friends that non-violence without class struggle could not bring justice. Here was a Marxist who came to power not through a bloody revolution but through elections. When a CIA-sponsored military coup killed Allende on 11 September 1973, and thousands of workers and citizens were massacred, it was a devastating blow to the cause of democracy and socialism. Guzman's epic documentary captures the glory and the tragedy of the Allende years."

Apart from the importance of the film's content, what clearly fascinates India's foremost documentarist who has never been known to shy away from his responsibilities as a public intellectual at a time of crisis for his people, are its formal qualities and its engagement with an aesthetics that can be poetic even as stormy political events are recorded. Patwardhan: "In the 1970s, Julio Garcia Espinosa hailed the arrival of 'Imperfect Cinema', its hand-held, black-and-white, grainy, fast-moving footage bearing the marks of the struggle it depicted. Guzman's aesthetic rises beyond 'imperfection' and self-conscious radicalism, its poetry stemming from an unerring faith in the importance of the ordinary as it intertwines with the extraordinary."

True, democracy returned to Chile in 1990 after 17 long years of death and destruction that need not have been if only the military or the media had not been fatally corrupted by fear, greed or spinelessness. True, more recently, an idealistic and energetic leader of the poorest of the poor has been elected to the highest office in the land in the hope that he will follow in the path of Allende's experiments with truth for popular good. But let no one forget that it will be a long time before memories of that dark night, authored combinedly by the native oligarchy and the White House, are forgotten. Memories of friends and relatives disappeared; of neighbours who chose to look the other way lest they got involved with the authorities; of strange lands of exile that threw up unexpected comrades; and of a divided society so badly riven that time may try but never wholly heal.

If Pinochet's surviving salesmen of death are finally rounded up as a result of the court order pronounced in late May 2008, and adequately punished, their victims, wherever they are—in unmarked graves, in proper cemeteries, or gone with the wind—will have reason to rest in peace at long last. But even after that, Patricio Guzman, for one, may be counted upon to continue to be haunted by obstinate memories of sunless days and nights without end. "For me, it is as if the coup d'etat took place yesterday": Guzman.

Allende and Neruda, "two of the dead who will never die", are, of course, larger-than-life figures who have rightly passed into the history of the modern world complete with numerous betrayals and an occasional triumph of the human spirit. Again, Littin, Guzman, Justiniano, Caiozzi or Pineda have rightly entered the pages of Chilean history and even a pan-continental consciousness by virtue of their films, writings and other interventions on behalf of the many lost and a few found who had been thought to be lost. But a simple story to be found in the slim but scorching *Clandestine in Chile*, jointly written by Miguel Littin and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, gives eternal life to an entire history of repression and resistance. Littin, being less of a writer and more of a film-maker, spoke about his experiences which were written down by Marquez in a manner that only he could. Marquez writes simply but with a depth of feeling that few chroniclers can evoke, of a woman who was taken aside by Littin so that no one would overhear their conversation and asked whether she had been an *Allendista*. She reacted sharply: "Not had been, *am*." And removing a figure of Virgin Mary in the house, she revealed a photograph of Allende behind it.

## PABLO NERUDA'S HOME

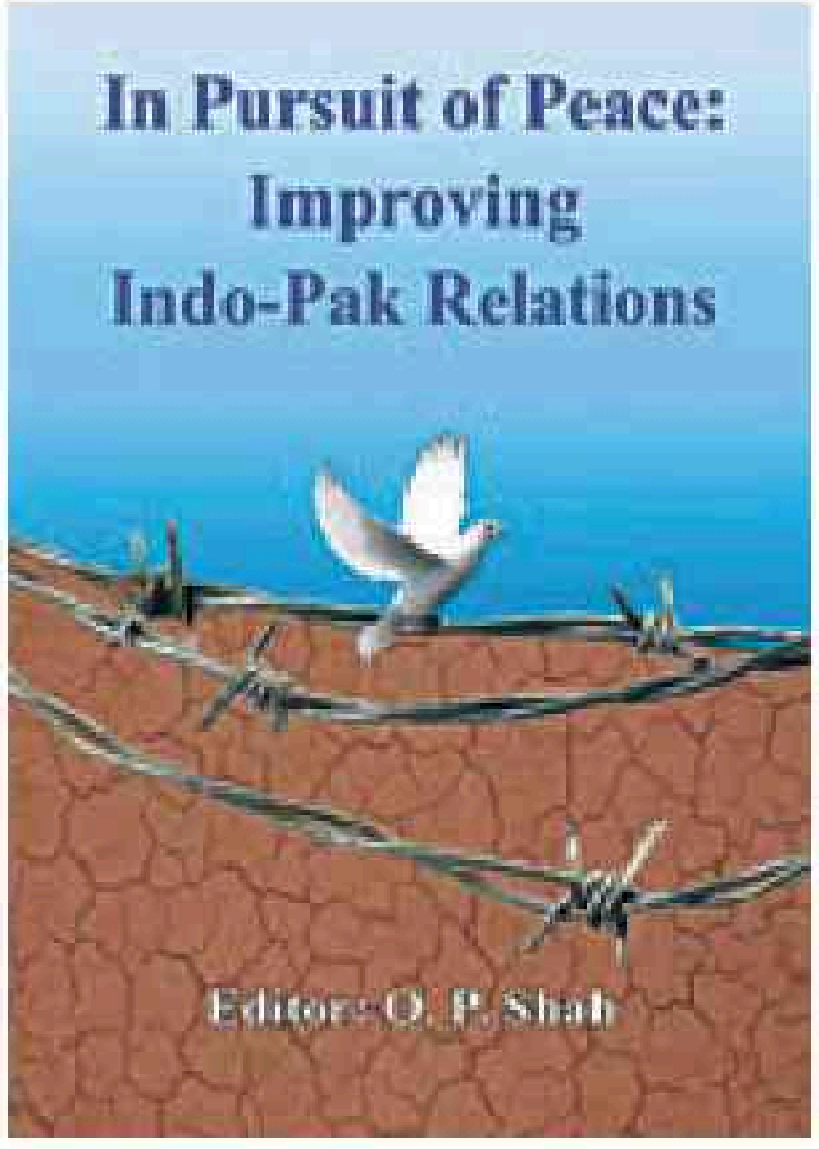
Littin, incognito, also visited Neruda's seaside home at Isla Negra, sealed and closed to visitors by the military. The film-maker found that despite the army's determined efforts, the poet's home had become a place of pilgrimage to generations of men and women in love who loved their country no less. On barred shutters and on wooden planks used to seal the house, there were thousands of messages and signatures of love and gratitude, often scrambled over each other for want of space: *Juan and Rosa love each other through Pablo ... Thank you, Pablo, for teaching us love ... We want to love as much as you loved ... Generals, love never dies. Allende and Neruda live. One minute of darkness will not make us blind.* For the next few years, Gabriel Boric, the new *El Presidente*, has an opportunity to enter the spirit and substance of some of Chile's foremost statesmen in politics and the arts; to nurse old wounds and achieve new beginnings. ☐

*Vidyarthy Chatterjee, based in Kolkata, is a veteran film critic.*

# Building bridges

This book is a significant contribution to the understanding of India-Pakistan relations and the complex peace-building process.

BY **K.S. SUBRAMANIAN**



**In Pursuit of Peace**
**Improving Indo-Pak Relations**
Edited by O.P. Shah
**Centre for Peace & Progress, Kolkata, 2021**
**Pages: 320**
**Price: Rs.600**

THIS volume contains a formidable collection of 50 articles by experts, compiled by O.P. Shah, chairman, Centre for Peace and Progress, Kolkata, and an eminent peace activist. Over the last 30 years, he has been trying to find peaceful solutions to the problems India and Pakistan face mutually in order to establish harmony and bridge the inherited gulf between people divided by history and politics, especially in Jammu and Kashmir, which was once described as the most dangerous place on earth. Considering the emergence of India and Pakistan as nuclear powers in the 1990s, the exercise could have included some other dimensions of the peace processes—historical, political, social, economic, and so on.

The articles are arranged in the alphabetical order of the contributors' names. Shah deserves praise for his efforts to document problems in complicated conflict situations and move towards possible solutions.

In his prologue, Shah explains the context and purpose of his efforts to create opportunities for mutual understanding among people who are divided by caste, religion, ethnicity, and so on. India and Pakistan originated from a basic conflict at birth, which has led to a great deal of mutual misunderstanding and tensions. The complexity of the processs of improving India-Pakistan relations is evident from the rich collection of essays in this volume.

## BACKCHANNEL DIPLOMACY

In his article 'Bridging the Gulf' (pp.158-167), Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, formerly Pakistan Foreign Minister and an eminent peace builder in South Asia, makes a solid contribution to improve bilateral relations. His masterpiece, *Neither a Hawk nor a Dove: An Insider's Account of Pakistan's Foreign Policy* (Penguin 2015), makes a strong case for resumption of the stalled backchannel diplomacy in order to find a fair and just solution to the vexed disputes over Kashmir and other issues.

In his book, Kasuri extols the framework for the resolution of the Kashmir conflict that evolved through backchannel diplomacy during the time of President Parvez Musharraf and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

India and Pakistan became nuclear powers in May 1998. A peace process initiated at the February 1999 meeting of the two Prime Ministers was followed by the Agra summit in July 2001, which failed owing to a lack of adequate preparation.

The 2004 meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Islamabad led to a Composite Dialogue Process. Kasuri reiterates the need to continue backchannel diplomacy.

Real progress was made via backchannel negotiations from 2004 to 2007. A four-point formula for the settlement of the Kashmir conflict emerged: i) Jammu and Kashmir would not be made independent; ii) borders would not be redrawn; iii) the Line of Control (LoC) would be made irrelevant; and iv) a joint mechanism would be established for management of both parts of Kashmir.

The political dispensation under Narendra Modi in 2014 and again in 2019 erected obstacles in the path of peace, stopping its progress. Kasuri cites Henry Kissinger who said that the goal of backchannel diplomacy in hostile complex international negotiations should be to achieve not full satisfaction but balanced dissatisfaction.

Kasuri expresses concern over the Indian move of August 5, 2019, to change the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir and its covert anti-

Pakistan operations in Afghanistan. He urges both countries to give up their 'zero-sum approach' in dealing with each other. The common challenge in both countries is poverty eradication. Mutual respect and mutual confidence are essential, he says. Only a 'win-win' solution will work for both countries. Religious polarisation in India will set back mutual cooperation.

The author wants the recent ceasefire between the two countries to be made permanent. There can be no peace if the core issue of Kashmir remains unsettled. Both countries need to show flexibility and address issues that disturb the peace, such as terrorism, bigotry, majoritarianism and extremism. Minority rights should be protected at all costs. The LoC must be made the line of connectivity and cooperation, says the author.

Rather than be wary of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), India should see it as an opportunity to connect the whole of South Asia. Further, instead of destabilisation as in the past, both countries must work for peace and reconstruction. The SAARC mechanism should be put to constructive use, he says.

Kasuri holds further that India should respect the statesmanlike appeal for peace and cooperation made by General Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, on March 18, 2021. Kasuri devotes particular attention to the media's role. People-to-people cooperation is the need of the hour, he says. He believes backchannel diplomacy must continue despite the recent setbacks.

### CONNECTIVITY AND COOPERATION

Sudheendra Kulkarni, who was aide to former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, states that 'maximalist positions' (pp. 278-288) are under retreat in both countries. He calls for the conversion of the 'Line of Control and Conflict' along the India-Pakistan border into a 'Line of Connectivity and Cooperation', enabling India and Pakistan and the Kashmiri people to move closer to each other in solving the long-standing dispute. He gives evidence to show that both countries and even the hard-line Indian Prime Minister are in favour of connectivity and cooperation, abandoning maximalist positions on issues, including Kashmir. Changes in General Bajwa's position must be welcomed. Moeed Yusuf, Pakistan's National Security Adviser, too has spoken on similar lines.

Kulkarni notes that both India and Pakistan, as well as India and China, which have so far allowed their bilateral relations to be guided by geopolitical and geostrategic considerations, are now in favour of putting geo-economic, geo-social, geo-cultural and geo-civilisational considerations at the forefront.

The emerging new order in Asia and Eurasia has prioritised the concept of connectivity as a factor that promises history-transforming benefits.

At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Qingdao in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accepted the importance of connectivity in the region. India cannot achieve connectivity in the neighbourhood without partnering with Pakistan and China and without joining the CPEC. It would be futile for India to raise the issue of sovereignty to oppose the CPEC which passes through a part of Jammu and Kashmir. India cannot stop Islamabad and Beijing from implementing the CPEC.

Kulkarni makes a compelling case here, which is a major contribution to the peace process in the region.

Anis Haroon of Pakistan-India People's Forum writes on the "unfinished agenda of Partition" (pp. 33-42). Naureen Farooq Ibrahim Khan dis-

> **The emerging new order in Asia and Eurasia has prioritised the concept of connectivity as a factor that promises history-transforming benefits.**

THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

**PRIME MINISTER MANMOHAN SINGH** and Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf, in New Delhi on September 9, 2005. An essay in the volume extols the framework for the resolution of the Kashmir conflict that evolved through backchannel diplomacy when they were in power.

cusses the need to "move beyond the past for a better future" (pp. 229-235). Both have provided gendered perspectives on peace-building in a sensitive, humane context.

### INDIA'S ROLE

Mushahid Hussain, Chairman of the Senate Defence Committee, Pakistan, makes disturbing revelations about India's negative role in the region. He says that the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's intelligence agency, set up 66 training camps in Afghanistan and they have disappeared after the liberation of the country from the control of the United States.

Hussain mentions three geopolitical points that could improve India-Pakistan relations. i) The decline of U.S. power in the region has marked an end to U.S. military operations in third countries. U.S. unilateralism has given way to multilateral diplomacy. ii) The rise of China and its global development through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been accepted by over 120 countries, but not India. China's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is not matched by India, which has opted out of it. Of the total 193 countries in the world, 123 have more trade with China than with the U.S. iii) Given the CPEC, Pakistan has become the hub of regional connectivity, with its Gwadar Port as the most convenient port for landlocked Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Some key strategic positives could help the nuclear neighbours—India and Pakistan. General Bajwa prefers normalisation of relations with India. The change in Afghanistan has provided a strategic space to Pakistan and allows friendship with China and closer ties with Russia. The U.S., too, looks at Pakistan as a vital link of communication with Afghanistan.

Hussain notes three impediments to Pakistan's closer friendship with India: i) Indian rulers' Hindutva preoccupation; ii) India's change of the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir on August 5, 2011, which constrains settlement of the border dispute with Pakistan and China; iii) India's emerging closeness to the U.S. creating new lines of confrontation in the region, including between China and India.

### FOR BETTER RELATIONS

Satinder K. Lambah, Special Envoy to the Prime Minister of India (2005-14), an important figure in the backchannel negotiations, is of the view that the constitutional changes in India need not come in the way of building better relations with Pakistan. He states (pp. 289-295) that domestic policies on both sides are the biggest obstacle to normalising relations between the two countries. The agreement negotiated in 2007 would not be affected by the changes in the status of Jammu and Kashmir made by India in August 2019. The agreement was made keeping in mind not any individual or a particular political party but the future of the two nations. Successive Prime Ministers who have had different styles of functioning have handled the issue of peace differently. A settlement would benefit the people of Jammu and Kashmir and strengthen the prospects of durable peace and stability in the region; it would enable India to focus more on the rapidly emerging long-term geopolitical challenges.

Several authors—A.M. Watali (p. 70), Iqbal Ahmad Khan (p.141), Asif Khurshid (p. 43), Altaf Hussain Wani (p.60), Farooq Abdullah (p.104), Admiral Ramdas and Lalita Ramdas (p. 180), Mani Shankar Aiyar (p. 189), Mohamad Yusuf Tarigami, (p.214), Niladri Shankar Mukherjee (p. 236) and Talat Masood (p. 380)—have made important contributions in the book.

Shah, by producing this book on a complex subject, has made a vital contribution to understanding the relations between India and Pakistan and the complex peace-building process. ☐

*K.S. Subramanian is a retired Director General of Police. He is an author and his current area of interest is peace and conflict studies.*

# ‘Every society has its darkness’

Interview with Paul Waters, author and TV and radio reporter and producer. BY **SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY**

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

THE Irish novelist Paul Waters is an award-winning programme producer who has worked for BBC Radio 4, BBC 5 Live, BBC Northern Ireland and BBC World Service. He is a man for all seasons: “driven a cab in England, been a night club cook, designed computer systems in Dublin, presented podcasts for Germans and organised music festivals for beer drinkers”. He lives in Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom, with his family.

In terms of the sheer range of activities he has undertaken, Waters would easily surpass even the indomitable Eric Blair, more popularly known as George Orwell, whose early work, the autobiographical *Down and Out in Paris and London*, offers vivid vignettes from the underworld of London and Paris.

In December 2021, Waters was in Bhubaneswar for the Kalinga Literary Festival where he was on “the historical novel” panel for which this writer was the moderator. When this writer mentioned the Raj and looked somewhat accusingly at Waters, he exclaimed with a twinkle in his eyes: “Sorry, don’t blame me! I am Irish!”

*Blackwatertown*, his new novel, is a fictional study of the complex relationship binding Northern Ireland and Ireland with their fascinating histories and geographies, policemen and civilians. Described as an Irish thriller, the novel is set in a sleepy border town in 1950 and encompasses seven crucial days in terms of action, seen from the vantage point of the maverick Sergeant Jolly Macken. As the blurb on the back of the book says, the protagonist “accidentally starts a war, is hailed a hero and branded a traitor. When Blackwatertown explodes into violence, who can he trust?” As Waters explains, Blackwatertown stands for other lands too, such as the Indian subcontinent, caught in the vortex of violence and displacement, loyalty and betrayal.

Waters is learned, witty and a good conversationalist. He speaks about his novel and the genre of the thriller, the interface between journalism and literature, about strife and turbulence, love and loss, sin and expiation. His next novel, he says, promises to bring together Ireland

and India. Excerpts from the conversation:

**"Blackwatertown" is described as an "Irish thriller". The Irish part is understandable, given your background; why a thriller? What prompted you to take up this genre? Frederick Forsyth described your work as "extremely intriguing". Could you explain your use of the genre and Forsyth's remark?**

I've always been a voracious reader, across genres, fiction and non-fiction, but thrillers and crime fiction are where I go to relax. That's one reason I wanted to write that sort of book. But it's also because of the story I was bursting to tell.

The particular inspiration for *Blackwatertown* came from family members who served in the Northern Ireland police force, which back then was called the RUC, the Royal Ulster Constabulary. It was a force unlike any other in the U.K. or Ireland. As well as normal policing duties, it also served as a well-armed paramilitary force guarding the northern side of the border that divides Ireland. Like many people in India, my family comes from both sides of the border. The frontier recently reached the grand age of a hundred years old but somehow feels less permanent than ever.

It made life very difficult for a Catholic police officer. On the one hand, he was expected to risk his life for the Protestant state. On the other, he might still be regarded with suspicion, as a potential traitor, simply because of his religion. In addition, his police service could sometimes alienate him from his Catholic community or even put him at greater risk of assassination. And don't forget, during the periodic outbreaks of insurgency, the front line for a police officer (whatever his or her religion) may be an assassin waiting at the front door of their home or a bomb under their car.

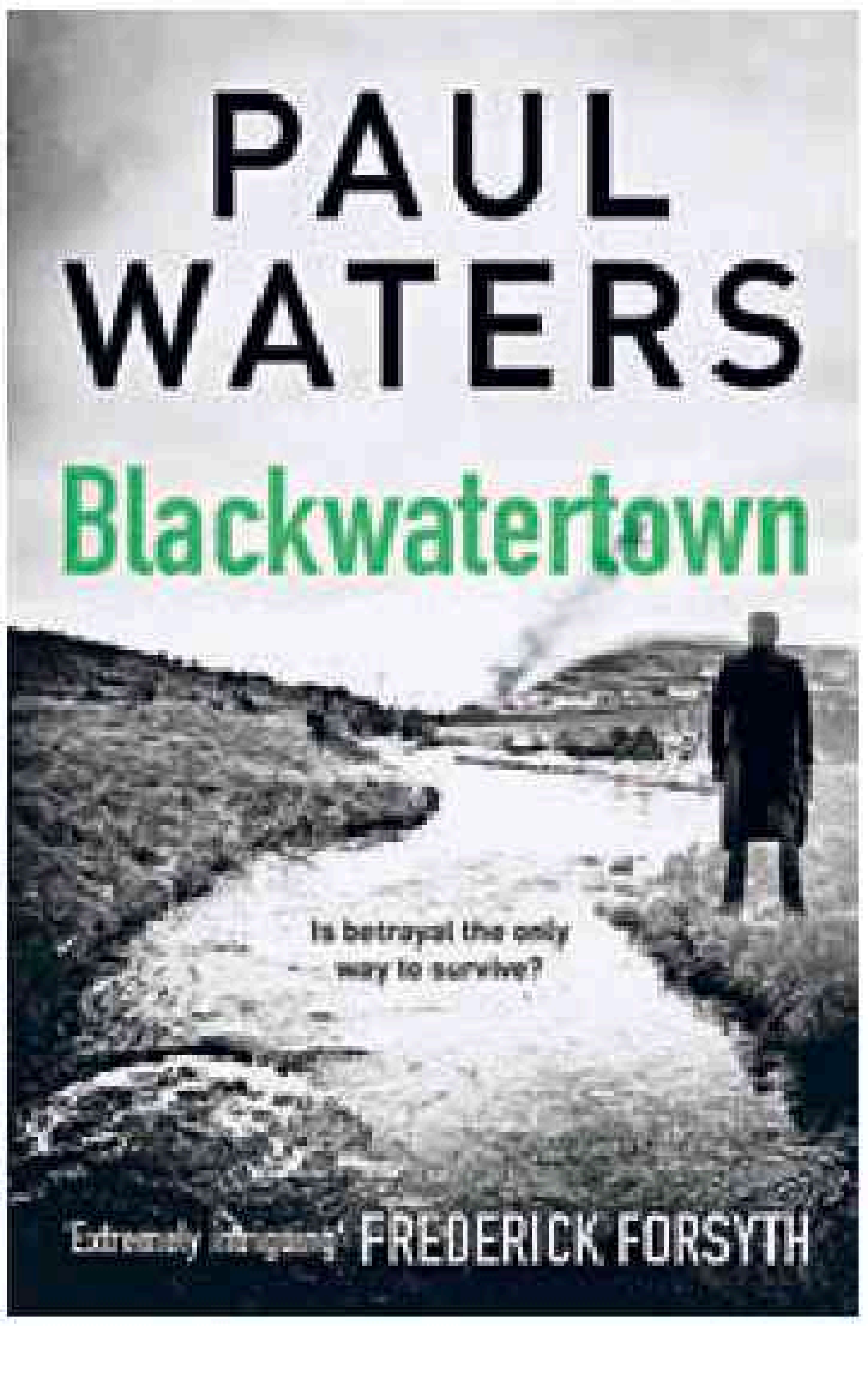
Pretty horrific to live through. But a rich seam for an author to mine. Moral dilemmas, divided loyalties, contradictions and betrayal, unexpected outbreaks of terror—great ingredients for the thriller or crime fiction writer. *Blackwatertown* is fiction.

Despite the historical basis and all the secret truths revealed transforming it into a thriller gives me the freedom to manipulate the facts in whatever way I choose. I can condense the action, humour and suspense into what Frederick Forsyth says is "a fascinating story with intricate twists and turns ... extremely intriguing". I think what he means ... is that the basic premise has a person in a seemingly impossible situation, which only gets worse, and how he or she rises to the challenge, with no certainty of success or survival.

**How has your experience as a television journalist for the BBC and other international channels influenced your writing style in "Blackwatertown", if it has?**

I have been a television and radio reporter and producer, staff and freelance, mainly for the BBC, for many years. It has given me wonderful access to people and places and behind-the-scenes stories around the world. My broadcasting career of short sentences, short deadlines and other people's tales is something I've had to put aside for my own stories, occasionally more meandering sentences and much longer deadlines.

**You have had a chequered career, much of it as a "commoner", (a cab driver, a night club cook, and so on).**


PAUL
WATERS
Blackwatertown
Is betrayal the only way to survive?
'Extremely intriguing' FREDERICK FORSYTH

**How has the view from "below", i.e. the subaltern perspective, shaped your writing? Were you influenced by George Orwell's "Down and Out in Paris and London"?**

In theory, an author can conjure any kind of realistic or fantastical world solely from their imagination. But having what you call a chequered career certainly stimulates that imagination. Power corrupts. You get an insight into that phenomenon when working in a service role and get to see how an ostensibly reasonable or respectful person behaves when they think the other person's humanity doesn't matter.

You also have the privilege of joining behind-the-scenes gangs, learning the shorthand and shortcuts that are hidden to "civilians". I'm nosy. My children complain that "no entry" signs draw me like magnets. I like looking behind the curtain.

I think it's also about who is important. Is it only the kings and queens of commerce or politics? Or is it everyone else whose lives are shaken by the blithe commands of those in power? Not everyone travels in air-conditioned comfort. Some of us squeeze onto the bus. Some of us walk. It's good to remember that. I think it makes for richer writing.

**The protagonist, according to you, is modelled after your great-uncle Mike, the one-time District Inspector Michael Murphy. In your words, he was a "rare Catholic in the Royal Ulster Constabulary". How have you transfigured the real-life Mike into Sergeant Jolly Macken in the novel? What liberties did you take in the portrayal of this character? And your reasons for doing so?**

The main protagonist in *Blackwatertown* is a demoted police sergeant called Jolly Macken. He is not ... modelled on my great-uncle Mike but is certainly partly inspired by him, and by other relatives and people in the police. Uncle Mike was a much-decorated war veteran as well as a senior police officer. He stormed the Hohenzollern Redoubt on the western front during [the First] World War when he served in the Irish Guards regiment of the

British Army. Later, when Ireland was partitioned, the larger southern part became independent and eventually the Republic of Ireland. Uncle Mike rose within the police force on the northern side of the border, in the smaller area that remained within the United Kingdom: Northern Ireland.

In June 1949, he escorted the then Princess (now Queen) Elizabeth as she inspected a guard of honour in front of Belfast City Hall. It must have gone well because he was promoted the following month.

It was not all hobnobbing with royals. There were also riots, attempts to kill him and dank, dreary rainy nights on duty. But this is clearly a Catholic who rose to a position of trust within the police apparatus even as the force became more and more Protestant overall. I remember when Uncle Mike died, British troops in Belfast let his funeral pass without hindrance through their roadblocks, which was puzzling for me as a child. So, it would be wrong for an author, for me, to paint a picture of unmitigated religious bigotry and discrimination. I feel that my fictional universe should bear some fair resemblance to the historical reality.

But few police officers are constantly courageous, efficient, honest and wise. I've also grown up on whispered stories of crises of conscience, faked ambushes, planted evidence and lawbreaking by the law enforcers. One of my favourites is the time when someone, no need for names, accidentally led an official motorised column over the frontier to occupy a town in the Republic of Ireland, a completely illegal cross-border invasion. His excuse? It was dark. They were lost. And the Irish border is more twisted than one of Frederick Forsyth's plots.

One of the main differences between Uncle Mike and Jolly Macken is that the real District Inspector seems to have been a man in command of any situation. Jolly Macken is a man torn and confused, embattled and betrayed, clever and naive, a loner who looks for trouble, heroic but human.

ROYAL ULSTER CONSTABULARY

RUSSELL BOYCE/REUTERS

**APRIL 11, 2000:** An officer of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) at its Belfast headquarters. From midnight November 3, 2001, the RUC became the Police Service of Northern Ireland as part of the restructuring of the police force under the Good Friday Agreement. Paul Waters: "The particular inspiration for *Blackwatertown* came from family members who served in the Northern Ireland police force, which back then was called the RUC,.... It was a force unlike any other in the U.K. or Ireland. As well as normal policing duties, it also served as a well-armed paramilitary force guarding the northern side of the border that divides Ireland."

**The critic Peter May said that "a sense of menace drives the narrative". How do you sustain the atmosphere of menace throughout the novel, until the very end? What techniques do you use?**

There is a saying that it is not enough that you succeed, but that your peers must fail miserably.

That is the opposite of the encouragement I have received from other thriller and crime fiction authors. It's a very supportive community.

One of the pervasive characteristics of Northern Ireland for me growing up was a constant sense of menace, that feeling that something bad was lurking round the corner or coming your way. My grandmother's parting words whenever I left her house were "be vigilant". And we were. Our eyes flitted from side to side, checking potentially suspicious cars, people, doorways, bags, alleys…. It was exhausting, cloying, all around.

One of my favourite authors, Eoin McNamee, conveys that sense of claustrophobia in his books, particularly *The Blue Tango*. Unease oozes from the earth, from the walls. That feeling that there's no room to turn around and check behind you.

Another favourite author, Will Dean, builds menace and unease throughout his Swedish crime thrillers by sprinkling images from what he calls his "Creeps Book". Will's Creeps Book is where he records odd images he encounters—like a wooden troll decorated with animal hair and human toenails or a snow skull with lingonberry jam dripping like blood—for later use in his stories.

I don't go in for anything quite as grotesque, but I quite like my introduction to the vicar of Blackwatertown village. I suppose the most effective way to depict menace is dramatic irony, when the reader knows more than the characters. I try not to be too explicit, but after a while the reader learns not to relax too much even when the story takes a funny, happy or romantic turn because who can you ever really trust?

**According to a critic, your novel is about "love, loss, bigotry and kindness". Do you think these traits have been the defining features of the Irish and Northern Irish experience during the war-torn, troubled histories of the two lands? Could you explain?**

I think it's important to remember and celebrate the kindness that persists during times of trouble and terror. Amidst horror, good people do good things. Life is not unremittingly bleak.

Love and kindness—and loss—are universal. Unfortunately, religious bigotry is something special (though not unique) to Northern Ireland and to some extent the Republic of Ireland in past days too. In both cases society has been evolving, for the better, I think. And that's especially true in the Republic of Ireland, which has amended its Constitution to be more welcoming to all its citizens. Large parts of the population of Northern Ireland have moved forward too, though much of the political class is still lagging behind.

The determination of campaigners and ordinary people to challenge authoritarian intolerance is one of the very hopeful drivers for change and reasons for optimism on both sides of the Irish border.

**David Roy in The Irish News describes your novel as "dark-hearted and darkly humorous". In fact, there seems to be a brooding sense of darkness throughout the novel. Why and how have you made it so, and how has this become part of the overall vision in the novel?**

I'm glad David Roy in [*The*] *Irish News* mentioned the humour, even if some of it is gallows humour. Every society has its darkness. I've learned that an overly calm and placid appearance may well conceal abuse. Excessive regimentation or kowtowing to authority stops up the cracks through which warnings and cries for help leak out.

Ireland used to be known as "the Land of Saints and Scholars". I'm sure we still have a few of each. But we pay more attention now to the abuse of women and children by those in authority. Previously, we looked the other way, blamed the victims or denied it happened at all. A far healthier society is one that admits and addresses the cancers at its heart. My story is set in the days when we allowed the cancer to eat away beneath the surface.

**Are you indebted to the tradition of the Irish novel? In what significant ways have your reading of the Irish genre shaped and influenced your novelistic craft?**

I'm not sure what "the Irish genre" is, beyond sharing a close or distant link to the same island. I am though indebted to the Irish authors whose wonderful work I've read over the years and continue to read now.

I suppose one of the most important influences was feeling that it was worthwhile and also that it was permitted to tell a story set in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland I was fed through the British media as I grew up was a dreary, grey place where it was always either raining bullets or just raining. I remember thinking that I would like to live in Kent because the U.K. weather forecasts always seemed to refer to that part of south-east England with the phrase "and another sunny day in the garden of England".

The bestselling Northern Irish author Adrian McKinty recounts how BBC TV commissioners told him that nobody was interested in stories from his part of the world. They sent him to scan the crime fiction shelves in a bookshop in the city centre, and sure enough, there were rows of Scandi noir, but almost nothing written by Irish authors. He ignored them and went on to write his acclaimed Sean Duffy series. And now more and more Northern Irish authors—like Stuart Neville, Steve Cavanagh, Brian McGilloway, Jan Carson, Lucy Caldwell—are captivating bigger and bigger audiences. It's now legitimate.

I've found other Northern Irish writers like Glenn Patterson and Maurice Leitch inspirational in the quiet approach they've taken to opening the door on how life is and can be and how it sits in an Irish landscape and social milieu that is often slower, quieter and more reserved than the big cities.

**Your lead quote in the book, by Napoleon, in the form of an epigraph, is: "What is history but a fable agreed upon." By this, do you question the objectivity of narrative history as conventionally understood, facts, data, and so on? Or do you think that there is nothing like history as a set of verifiable facts that are causally linked; in other words, everything is conjured up and imagined/constructed in the crucible of narrative imagination, part of what has come to be understood as discourse. New historicists and others seem to suggest this approach. What are your views on this and your handling of history in the novel?**

I come from a place where defini-

**FAMILIES OF THE VICTIMS** of Bloody Sunday and supporters marking its 50th anniversary, on January 30 in Londonderry, also known as Derry, Northern Ireland. The Bogside Massacre, which came to be known as Bloody Sunday, took place on January 30, 1972. British Soldiers shot at 26 unarmed civilians taking part in a protest march, killing 14.

tions, mandates and facts are disputed. Even the name of the place is not agreed on by those who live there: Northern Ireland, the Six Counties, the North, the wee North, Ulster, the province. Even the First and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland don't agree on what to call it. The second city is sometimes called Stroke City, an allusion to the stroke, or the slash mark, between the alternative titles Derry/Londonderry, depending on whether you're of an Irish or a British persuasion. (It's a lovely place to visit by the way, whatever you call it.)

And now that I think of it, Derry, or Londonderry, is a good place to examine the whole concept of being north (Northern Ireland) or south (Republic of Ireland) of the border. Because, although Northern Ireland is indeed in the north-east corner of the island, it's not quite that simple.

Let's go for a drive. We'll start in Derry, in "the North" and drive northwards until we cross the border into "the South", more specifically beautiful County Donegal. Actually, you can also drive westwards from "the North" into "the South". And southwards from "the South" into "the North". Feeling confused? Don't blame us. It was a gift from Britain. I think they may have gifted you in India something similar.

Another early memory is listening to a reporter on Downtown Radio. Dermot McDermott, I think his name was. He was very fond of the word "allege". His reports on bombings and shootings were a litany of allegations with very few accepted facts. "The police say.... The army allege.... The local MP alleges.... Local people say.... The IRA [Irish Republican Army]/UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force]/UDA [Ulster Defence Association] allege.... The local priest alleges.... The government claims...." No utterance was taken as fact. Everyone was equally credible or suspect. Or at least that's how I remember it.

And another aspect of Northern Ireland's sad and bloody recent history is the evolution of derided conspiracy theories into accepted wisdom. I'm thinking of the previously ridiculed claims of state collusion with terrorists, which are now widely accepted as true; the deliberately misattributed atrocities; the Bloody Sunday killings by the Parachute Regiment that were blamed on the victims and, later, much later, apologised for by British Prime Minister David Cameron. Irish republican and pro-British loyalist groups

CHARLES MCQUILLAN/GETTY IMAGES

have had their own chapters of fake history exposed over the years too.

So a reluctance to accept much at face value and an openness to alternative versions of the truth may indeed be part of the Northern Irish character. I wonder though if this is still true amongst younger people. Perhaps, we're growing out of suspicion?

**You took part in the Kalinga Literary Festival, Bhubaneswar, in December 2021 where your book was discussed by a panel on the historical novel. Was that your first visit to India? You told me that your Indian spouse's family and that of yours happen to share close bonds and connections in historical terms. That sounds uncanny and interesting. Could you explain?**

I had the great privilege and pleasure in taking part in the Kalinga Literary Festival in Bhubaneswar, thanks to the organisers and also to the British Council in India. It was a diverse gathering in many languages—poets, musicians, authors, visual artists, critics, commentators, journalists, sponsors and a Paralympic star. I was lucky enough to interview the singer Malini Awasthi on her efforts to preserve folk traditions.

It was not my first visit to India, but it was my first time in Odisha. I had the great good fortune to marry my wife, Aneysha, in Delhi last year. She and I attended the festival and were also able to visit sites around the city and other parts of the region, like Konark and Puri. She also discovered an unexpected link between our two families. I already knew of our family's admittedly tenuous link to India through Mother Teresa. My grandmother and an uncle had both worked with her during her ill-starred mission to Belfast in the 1970s. But my wife found something else in our shared family history. Quite a while ago, an aunt in my family switched careers to become a nun and was assigned to India. She was principal at schools and colleges in Pune, Mumbai, Shimla and finally Delhi, which brought her into contact with the Gandhi family. But it was earlier in Pune that she encountered my wife's mother, who was one of her pupils.

So, should we declare the later meeting and marriage linking our two families in India and Ireland as coincidence? Or fate?

**I understand that you are now writing an Indo-Irish novel based on your (early) Indian experience. Could you give us an idea of the novel in progress, its genesis, plot, and so on (without, of course, divulging too many details)?**

This is true. I am stepping with trepidation into writing a novel set in Delhi. And in return, I invite all Indian authors to set books in Belfast, Dublin, Stroke City or wherever else in Ireland they choose.

I'm exploring my own family's links with India, while taking appalling liberties with the details in a fictional plot. I'm also leaning on my new friends and new family in India for guidance. The book was inspired by some very entertaining conversations I had in India in December. I'm hoping to look at some contemporary issues in India but tell a story that reflects the country in a way that's positive and plausible overall. And hopefully fun. It's also an opportunity to give international readers a different view of India's links with the rest of the world, [one] that does not rest on old colonial connections.

Fingers crossed! ☐

*Sachidananda Mohanty is a former professor and Head of the Department of English, University of Hyderabad. He has published extensively in the field of British, American, gender, translation and postcolonial studies. He is a former Vice Chancellor of the Central University of Odisha.*

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**THE MAIN PROTAGONIST** in the book, Jolly Macken, is partly inspired by Paul Waters' great-uncle Mike, District Inspector Michael Murphy. In this photograph, which dates back to 1946, Murphy is with King George VI (on the left in naval uniform).

# Calendar Bawa

**THOPPIL MOHAMED MEERAN** (1944–2019) wrote six novels and several short story collections from which these stories are taken. He won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1997 for "Saivu Narkkali" and many other awards, including the Tamil Nadu Kalai Ilakkiya Perumantram Award and the Ilakkiya Chinthanai Award. He translated the biography of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer into Tamil.

In his writings, Meeran bemoaned what man had made of man and what man had made of nature. It pained him that men, who are the noblest of creations, should inflict cruelty in the name of religion, caste and gender. He wrote about real people and also about those located in another reality. His writings have an enveloping compassion, an inclusive humanity and hope.

**PRABHA SRIDEVAN** is a former judge of the Madras High Court (2000–10) and the former chairperson of the Intellectual Property Appellate Board (2011–13). She writes in English and Tamil on issues of law and life and has translated selected works of Chudamani Raghavan, S. Ramakrishnan, Imayam and U. Ve Swaminatha Iyer.

THE Yaanai Paarai, or the Elephant Rock, lay to the south of the city. You had to climb it to see the Nombu (holy fasting period of Ramadan) moon that marked the first day of Ramadan and the Perunaal moon when the last fast was ended. On a cloudless night, the crescent was a curved thread glued to the sky.

To make sure of the beginning of the Ramadan Nombu, people ran around shouting, "Have you seen the moon?"

We too stood on the rock to see the Perunaal crescent, the moon of Ramadan. We stood there, our eyes casting a net to catch the first sight of the moon, which appeared but for a brief moment. We went mad with anger if a shred of cloud crawled across the clear blue sky. We shouted curse words to our hearts' content. We stood waiting stubbornly for the cloud to move so that we could start the Ramadan celebrations; for only then could we go round to our relatives' houses, asking for *perunaappadi*, the Ramadan gifts, wearing new clothes, with attar-drenched tufts of cotton tucked behind our ears. As soon as we sighted the white apparition that appeared just for a few moments, we jumped off the Yaanai Paarai and raced down, yelling loudly.

"Has the moon been sighted?" An adult would accompany us to check if we children were lying about sighting the moon. He was none other than...Calendar Bawa.

He never uttered a lie. He was an honest man who stated what he saw without any exaggeration. If he said something, you did not need a witness to substantiate it.

"Oh certainly, I saw it," he said.

"Did you see it?" the chief asked again, just to make sure.

"I saw it with my own eyes." Every year, it was the same question and the same answer.

Immediately after the beat of the *nagara* drums, the loudspeaker of the *pallivasal* (mosque) blared out the Perunaal announcement. In our village, we did not refer to calendars.

Bawa was our calendar.

The village chief himself gave Bawa new clothes for the festival since Bawa had no wife or children. This was a dhoti-and-towel set. Apart from this, since Bawa swept and cleaned the *pallivasal*, a service he rendered voluntarily, he received two handfuls of food from everyone, like the chicken that pecks here and there.

A grey beard, a red round cap, a dhoti around his waist that reached his ankles, and a very loose shirt that came down to his knees (a gift from a man with a paunch, surely)—this was a description of Bawa.

Adrabu, Sultan, Hameedu and the rest of us climbed up the rock to sight the moon. As usual, Calendar Bawa came along as our witness. Akka, my elder sister, who had moved to Thiruvananthapuram after getting married, told *umma* (mother) that it would be Perunaal there tomorrow. Believing her, *umma* soaked rice in water to make snacks and delicacies, such as *ottappam*, *paalaadai* and *kinnathappam.*

Kaimani Sundaram's gift was two roosters. They were tied to the wire fence, pecking at the grain on the floor. They would be in the kitchen pot tomorrow, and I could smell the dish already. Then there would be ghee rice and all the special snacks.

Allah! Let tomorrow be Eid Perunaal. I vow that I will offer one rupee out of the Eid gifts I received.

They were kneading rice flour in Sultan's house to make *oratti*, the flatbreads for the feast. Hameedu's *vappa* (father) had brought a goat and tied it to the fence.

All of us were at the Elephant Rock with Calendar Bawa. The clear blue sky was cloudless, as though washed clean. The hair on Calendar Bawa's beard, just below the lips, stained by smoking beedis, looked brown.

He breathed smoke through his nostrils, plunging us children into a state of wonder. When we stuffed his shirt pocket with a bundle of Kumari Makkal beedis and Eli-mark matchsticks, Bawa, who was shivering in the cold month of Markazhi, was happy beyond words. The evening breeze that blew from the Arabian Sea was damp. When the sun drowned in the sea, our eyes rose towards the sky.

"Why this beedi roll, my child?"

"Isn't it cold?"

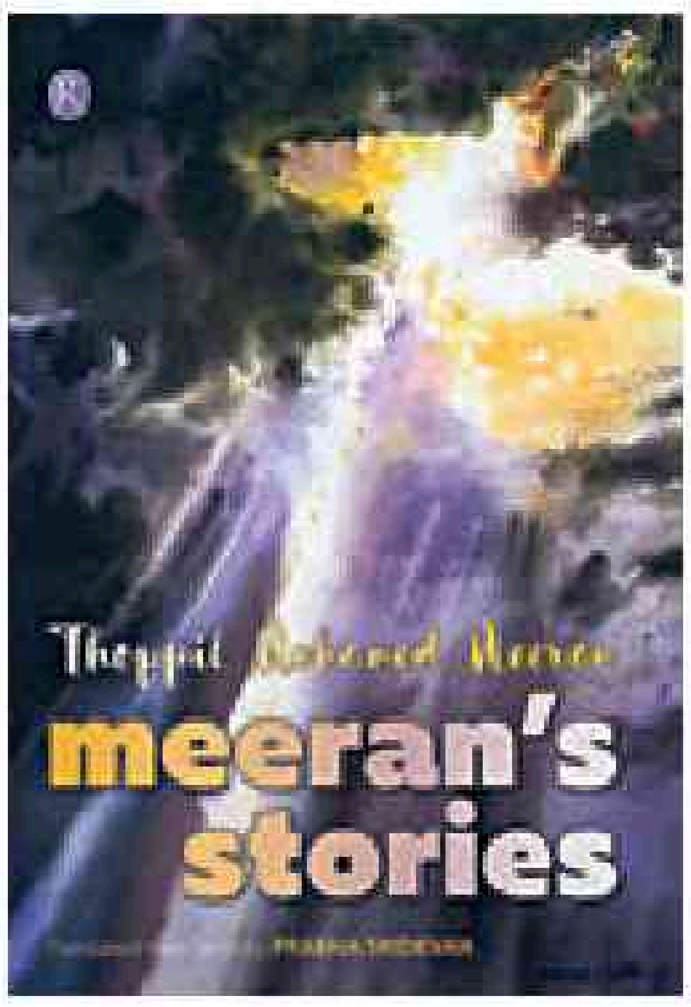
"Yes, very cold."

"Bawa, my *umma* has soaked the rice." Bawa did not pay attention to Adrabu.

"My *umma* has kneaded the flour," said Sultan.

Bawa's calendar eyes were fixed on the sloping blue sky unspotted by clouds.

"Bawa, have you seen the moon?" one of the boys asked.



**A CO-PUBLICATION** with the Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation, this collection of Meeran's stories is about the assault of progress on trees, birds, green fields, snakes and boys playing cricket. The stories are also about the effect of economic forces on human relationships; for instance, a grandson tells his grandfather: "The problem is you have lived too long."

The sound of the prayer was flowing from the loudspeaker placed specially for Perunaal on top of the minar. Bawa lit a beedi and broke his fast.

"See there, a cloud. Please look...don't you see a thread?"

Bawa was silent. He did not shift his eyes from the sky. It did not look as if there was a cloud. He thought to himself that there was no chance that Perunaal would be tomorrow.

"We all saw it, Bawa. Didn't you?"

Bawa wondered what to say.

Maybe my vision is fading with age? All the boys say they saw the crescent. They are all good boys. Nowadays, my eyes keep watering; it may be a sign of failing vision. Should I say I saw the crescent without sighting it? When all these children are saying that they saw the moon, should I deny it? What should I tell the headman?

Bawa was utterly confused.

He had never spoken a lie.

If the townspeople got to know that his eyes were failing, they would remove him from the wall, roll him up and fling him away. He was respected only because he was The Calendar. That wisp of cloud may have hidden the crescent, as the boys had said. Maybe the cloud had come and hidden the crescent just when he was wiping his watering eyes.

Doubts crowded his mind. When the young goats saw the sharp knives, they knew that they would throb, writhe and lose their lives tomorrow, and they bleated loudly. This set off tremors on the western side of town, at the foot of the Elephant Rock.

Standing on the rock, one could see the celebrations in the town and, also, the children's merriment.

This celebration...

These eruptions of joy...

The whole town will be crestfallen and sad if I say I did not sight the moon. The children bursting crackers and running helter-skelter with joy will flop down like tender spinach stalks.

The soaked rice and kneaded rice flour prepared by these very poor people...

It would be an act of extreme cruelty to extend the trembling fear felt by those young goats, which were already shivering at the prospect of death at the sight of those shiny sharp knives. To show them compassion on this holiest of days...to shorten their terror and agony by a day...

"Has the moon been sighted?" Adrabu shouted. Sultan and Hameedu echoed him.

Calendar Bawa walked behind them, his hands clasped behind him. The village chief waited at the *pallivasal*.

"Did you sight the moon?"

Do I say, "Yes, I did. I saw it with my own two eyes?"

Or do I say, "I did not."

In that moment of hesitation, suddenly his eyes watered.

"What do you say, Bawa?"

"My eyesight is not good."

He was now an old calendar and was rolled up and thrown away.

The village head ordered that the *nagara* beat begin and the *thakbir* (God is the greatest) be recited on the loudspeaker, announcing the Perunaal.

It was the new calendar... according to the children.

Allahu Akbar
Allahu Akbar
Allahu Akbar ☐

*Story selected by Mini Krishnan.*
*Reproduced courtesy of Ratna Books, 2022.*

WILDLIFE

# Amazing

Omnipresent, with a unique social organisation and the ability to adapt to different environments, ants have often been compared to human society. An excellent candidate for insect studies, ants greatly outnumber all other animals on the planet, including human beings.

Text by Dr VAITHIANATHAN KANNAN

# ants

**ARMY ANTS** (Aenictus artipus) are highly effective predators, armed as they are with large mandibles and a painful sting.

K. SADHEESKUMAR

ANTS, like bees and wasps, belong to the order Hymenoptera, within which they form a separate family, Formicidae. Entomologists, like their zoologist colleagues, like to draw up genealogical trees so as to classify animals by similarities, and so they have divided Formicidae into subfamilies (about 20), genera (between 296 and 358) and species. Around 12,467 species of ants have been discovered so far. These numbers will probably increase soon, given the rapidity with which myrmecologists (ant specialists) are adding to discoveries already made.

Since time immemorial, humans have been fascinated and intrigued by ants. And yet, at first glance, there is nothing particularly attractive about these tiny creatures. Unlike butterflies, they do not have wings with vivid colour patterns; they cannot boast the iridescent wing cases seen on many beetles. Nor do they produce things that humans like to eat or wear, such as honey or silk. Unlike crickets or cicadas, they do not chirp or sing; unlike bees, they do not dance.

They do, however, have other characteristics which are much more remarkable. For one, their social arrangements are quite extraordinary, almost unique among living creatures, and have often been com-

**THE WEAVER ANT** (Oecophylla smaragdina) acts as a keystone predator.

R. BHANUMATHI

R BHANUMATHI

**THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION** of ants and their ability to adapt to different environments enabled them to colonise the entire earth millions of years ago.

pared to human society. William Morton Wheeler, the founder of American myrmecology, wrote in *Ants* (1910): "The resemblances between men and ants are so very conspicuous that they were noted even by aboriginal thinkers." Likewise, ants are not only efficient but also hard-working and thrifty, qualities which seem like a good reason to see them as virtuous role models.

### HISTORICAL REFERENCES

In 1000 BCE, King Solomon hailed ants as models of wisdom, as noted in the Old Testament: "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provide her meat in the summer, and gather her food in the harvest" (Proverbs 6:6–8). Centuries later, La Fontaine's fable "The Cicada and the Ant" endorsed the same qualities. Ants are also mentioned in the Quran, which presents them as a highly developed race of beings, and in the Talmud, again as synonymous with honesty and virtue.

Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, Plato and Plutarch, praised these social insects as wise and clever. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder devoted a whole chapter of his *Historia Naturalis* to ants, expatiating on their bravery and strength. He even mentions ants as big as dogs found in India and Ethiopia that stood guard outside gold mines and killed any man who attempted to make off with the precious metal.

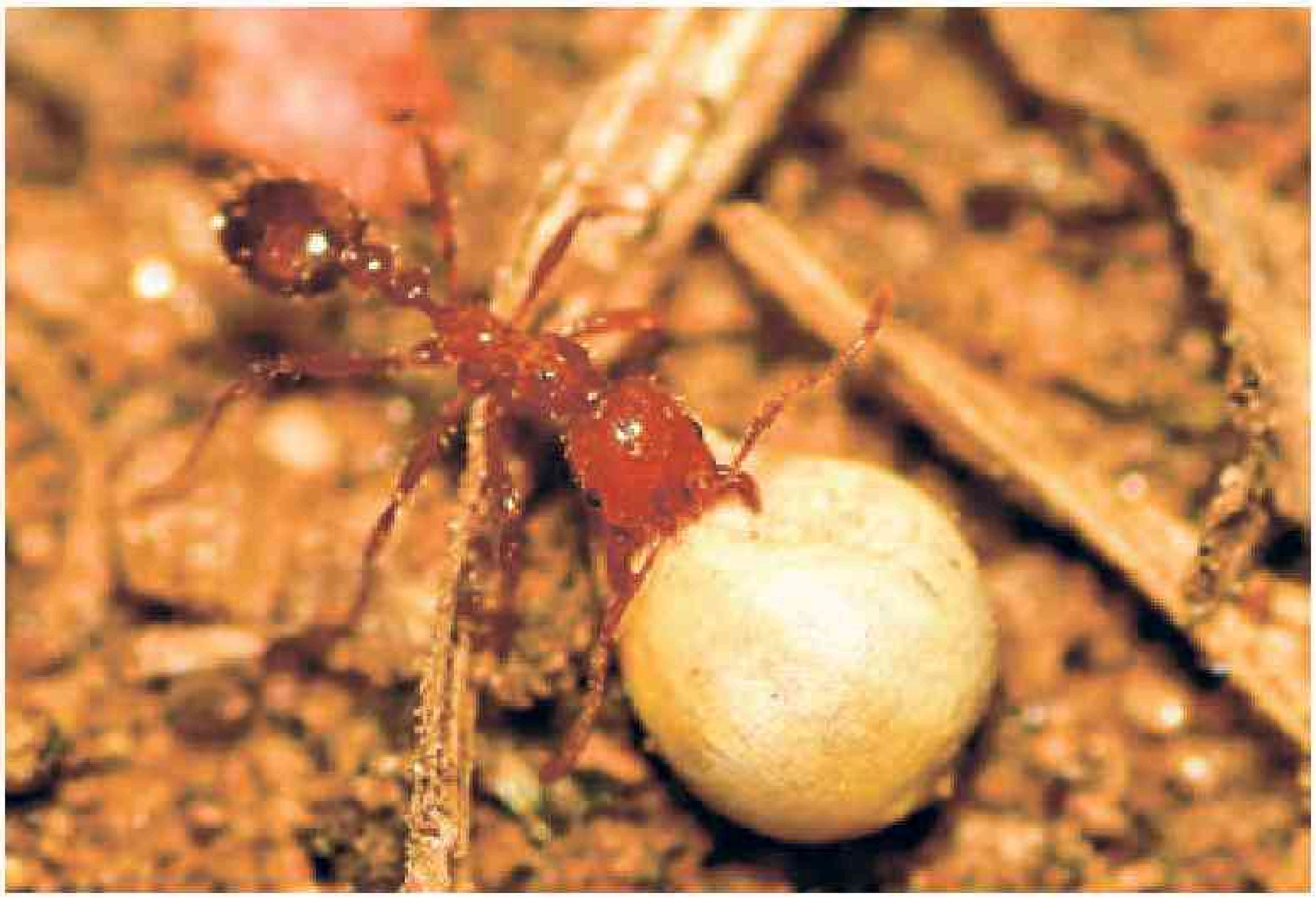
These accounts are, of course, closer to fiction than to fact, but they do attest to the human appeal of ants, as well as to the fears they could engender. They also reveal an awareness of how aggressive the insects could become. But what was uppermost in the ancient world's appreciation of ants was how they could communicate with one another, devise their division of labour, and construct nests of such architectural complexity, which the natural historian Aelian compared to palatial residences.

The Dogon people of West Africa saw ants as the wives of the god Amma and the mothers of the first humans. Ants were also central to traditional rituals, such as among the Wayana-Apalai peoples of Brazil, Surinam and French Guyana, where a boy reaching puberty had to demonstrate that he was worthy of adult status by wearing a sling full of fire ants round his torso or tied to his back, thus proving his courage and endurance.

In recent times, ants appear prominently in popular culture, from works of science fiction to novels, children's books, comics and video games. Toy manufacturers have taken to selling ant aquariums, so to speak, in which water is replaced by a nutritious gel, thus enabling children to have ant colonies of their

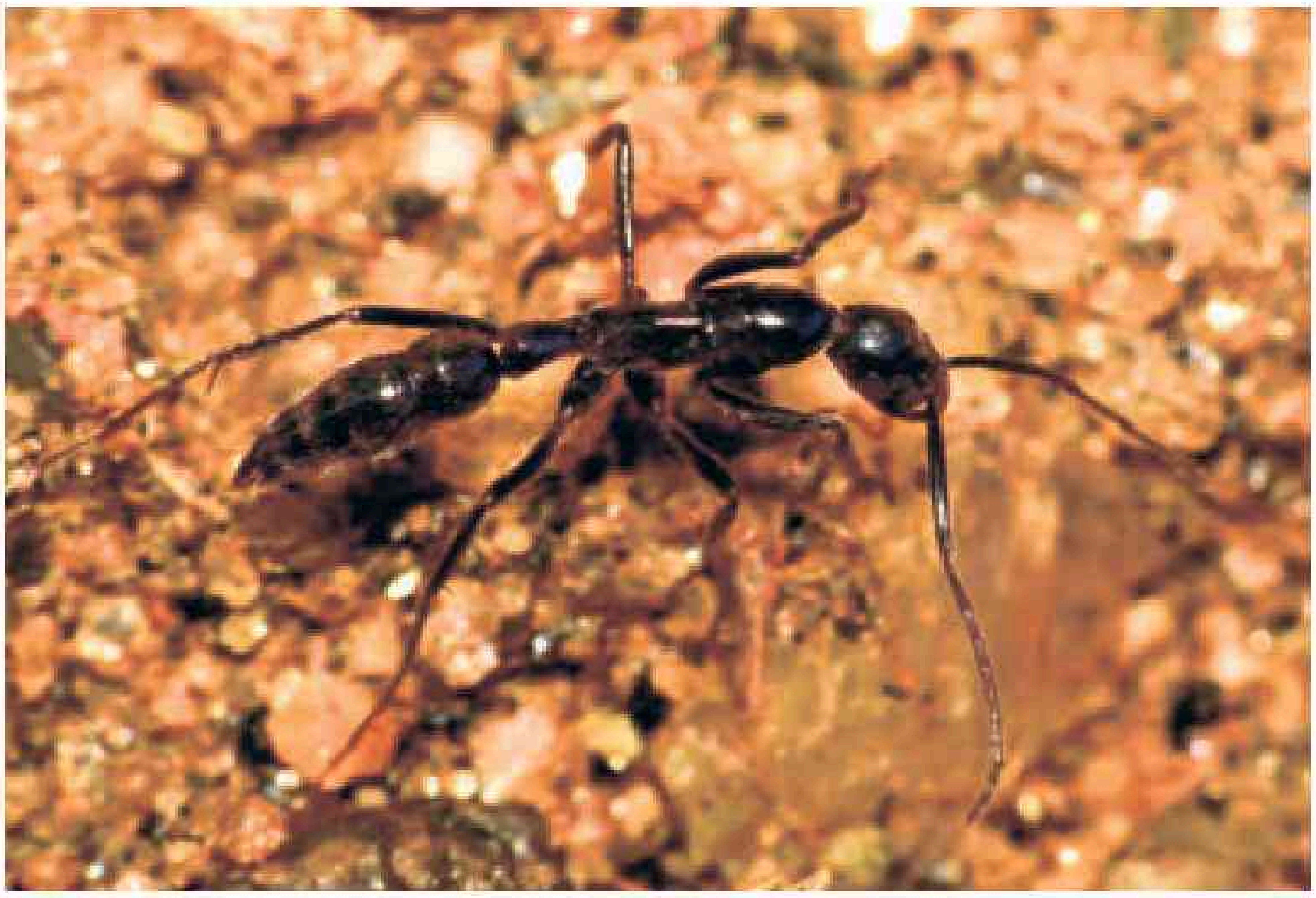
**SUGAR ANT**
(Camponotus consobrinus), a species native to Australia.

K. SADHEESKUMAR



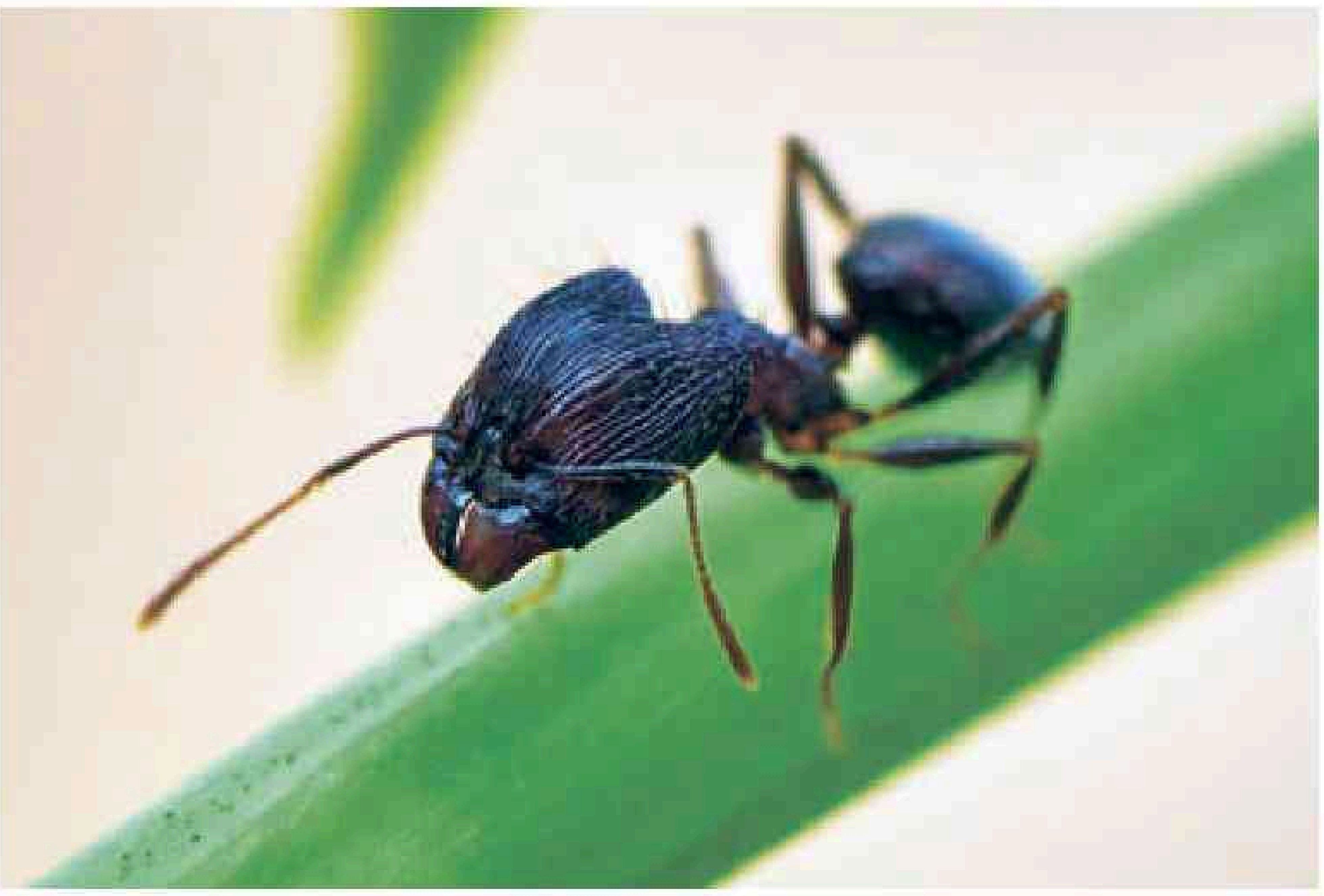
K. SADHEESKUMAR

**FIRE ANT** (Solenopsis geminate).



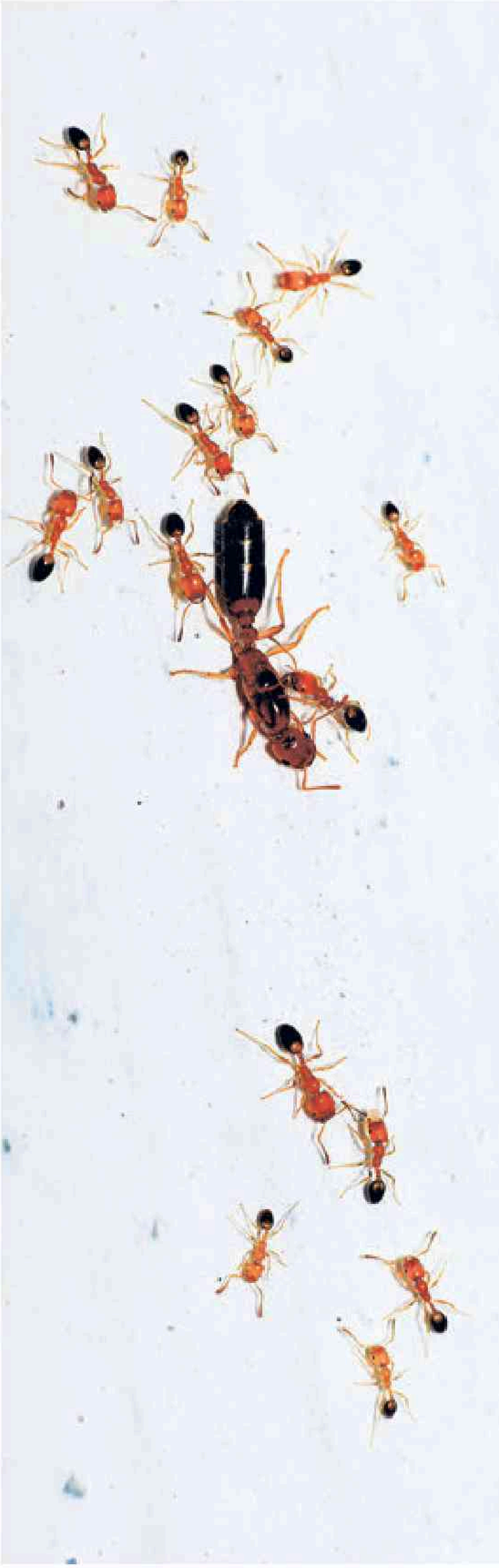
K. SADHEESKUMAR

**LEPTOGENYS PROCESSIONALIS,** a species of ant of the subfamily Ponerinae.



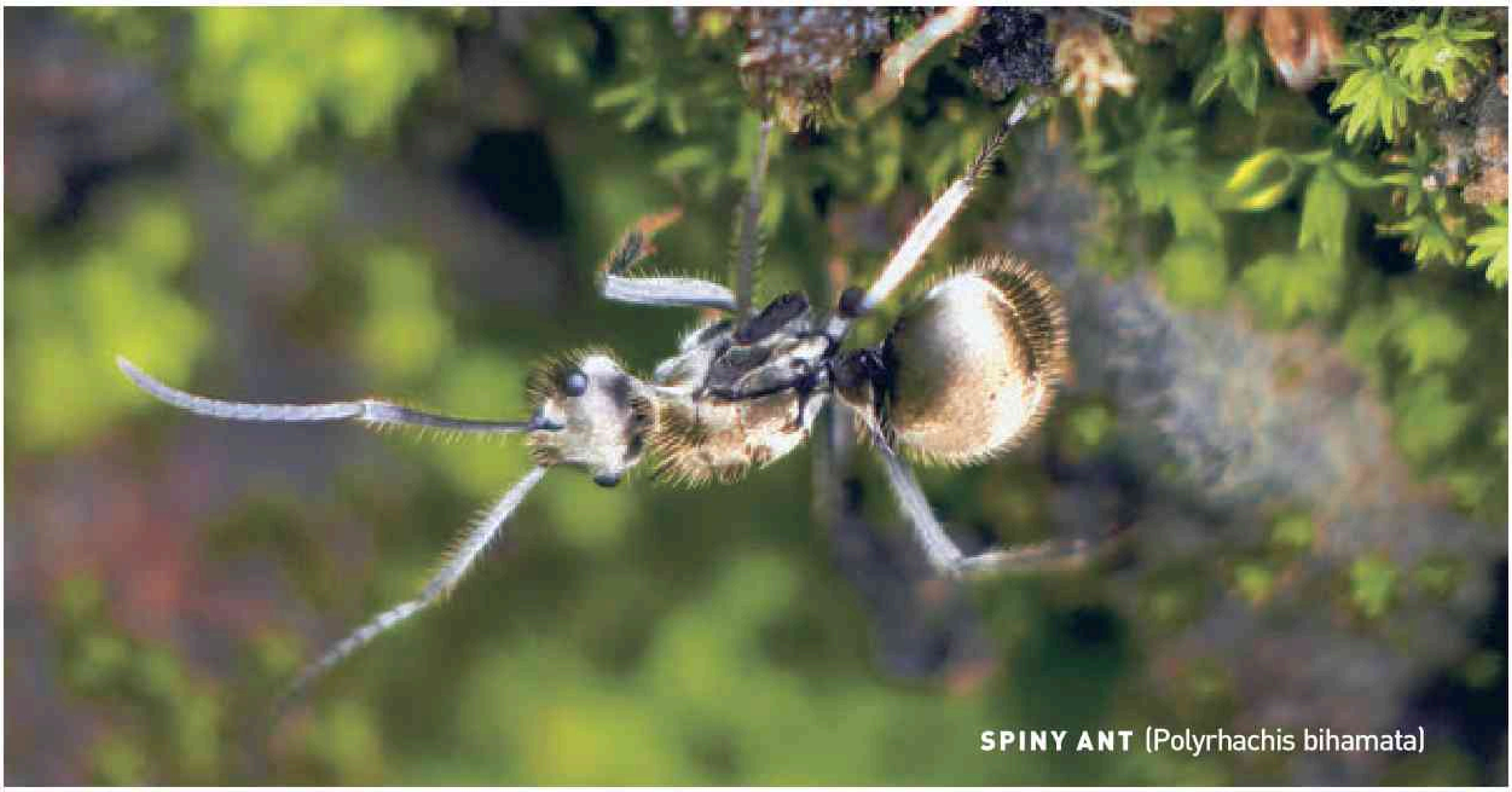
K. SADHEESKUMAR

**PHEIDOLE,** a widespread and ecologically dominant genus of ants that includes more than 1,000 species.



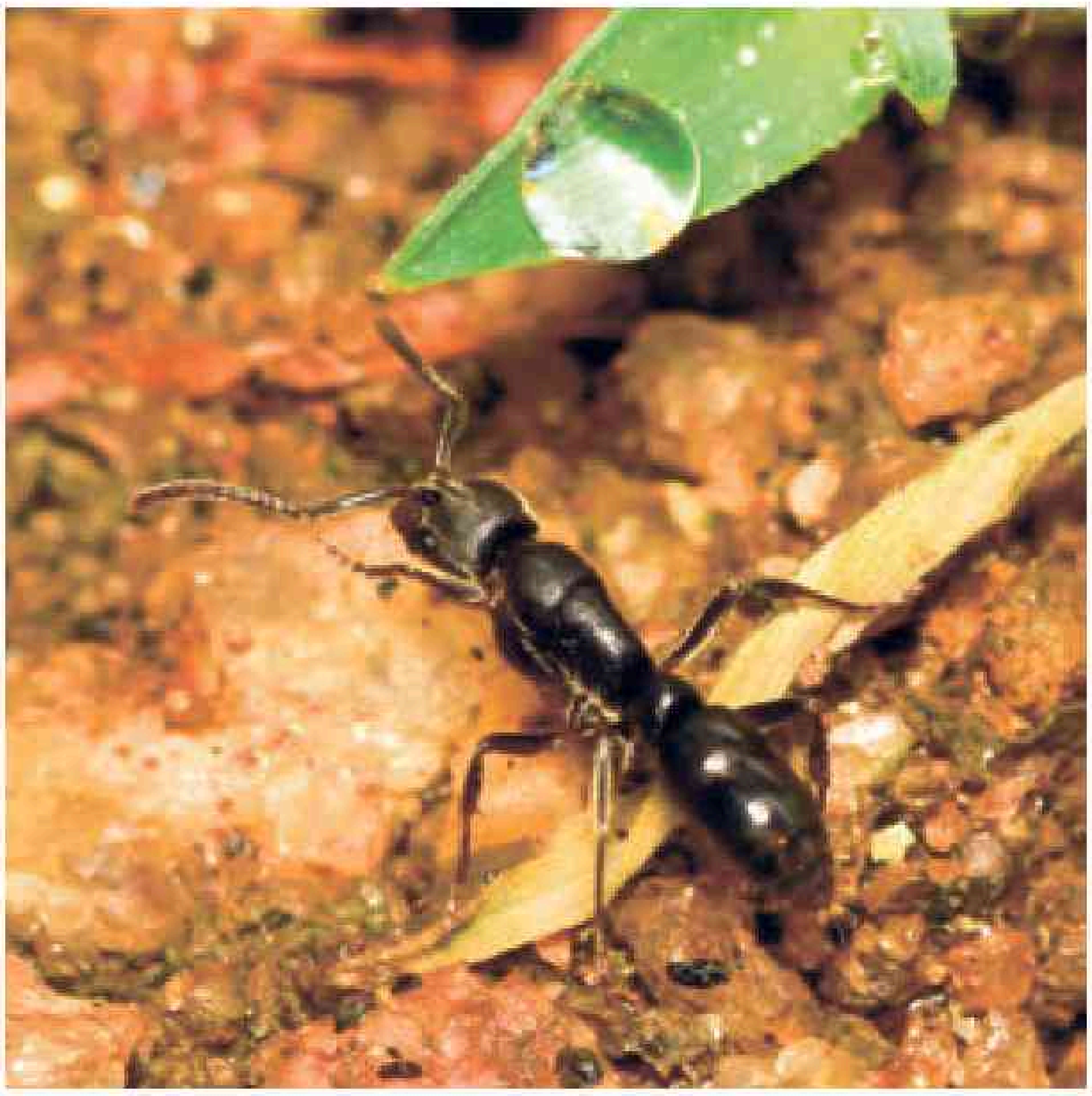
K. SADHEESKUMAR

**SINGAPORE ANTS** (Trichomyrmex destructor).



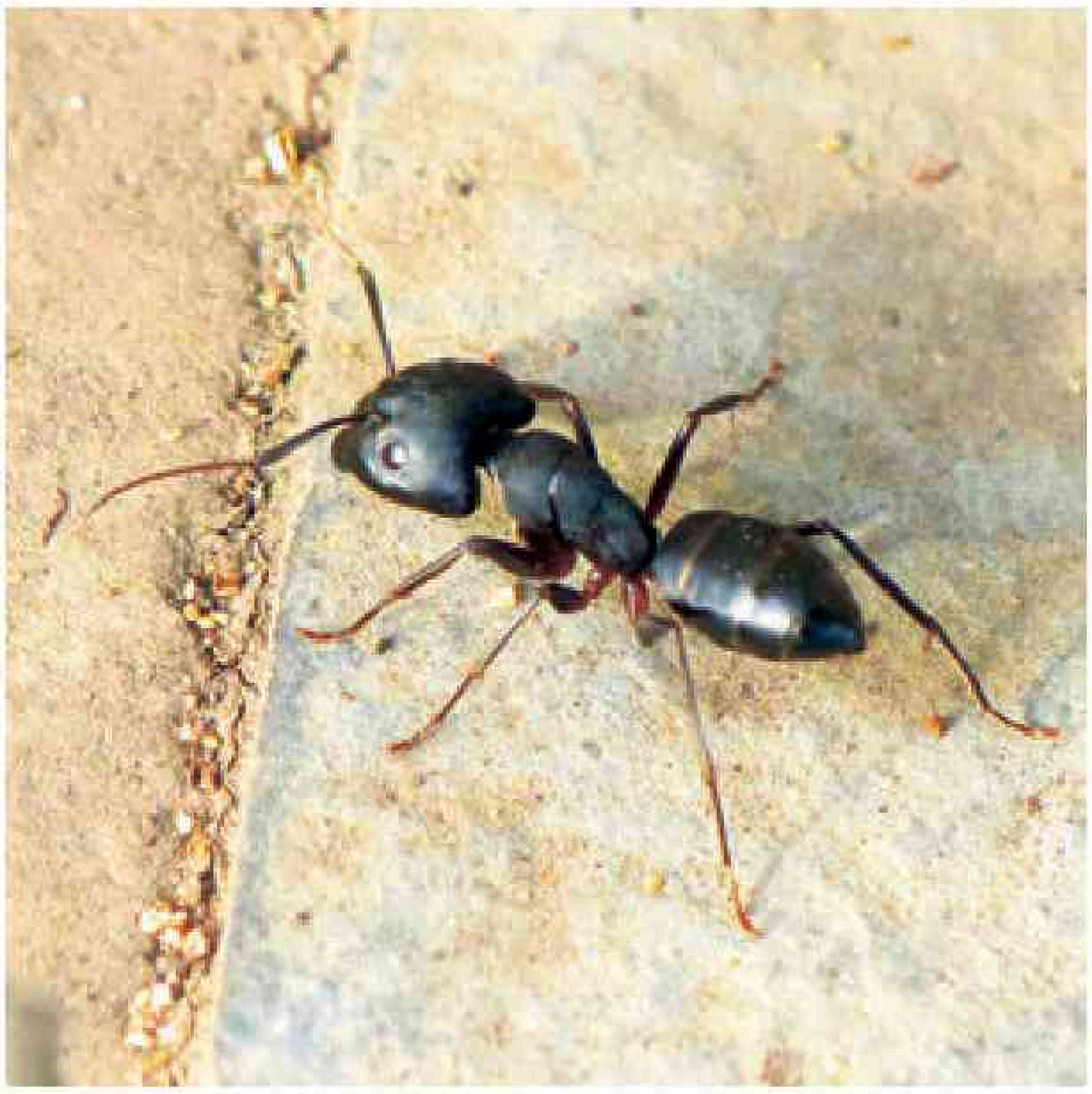
**SPINY ANT** (Polyrhachis bihamata)

R. BHANUMATHI



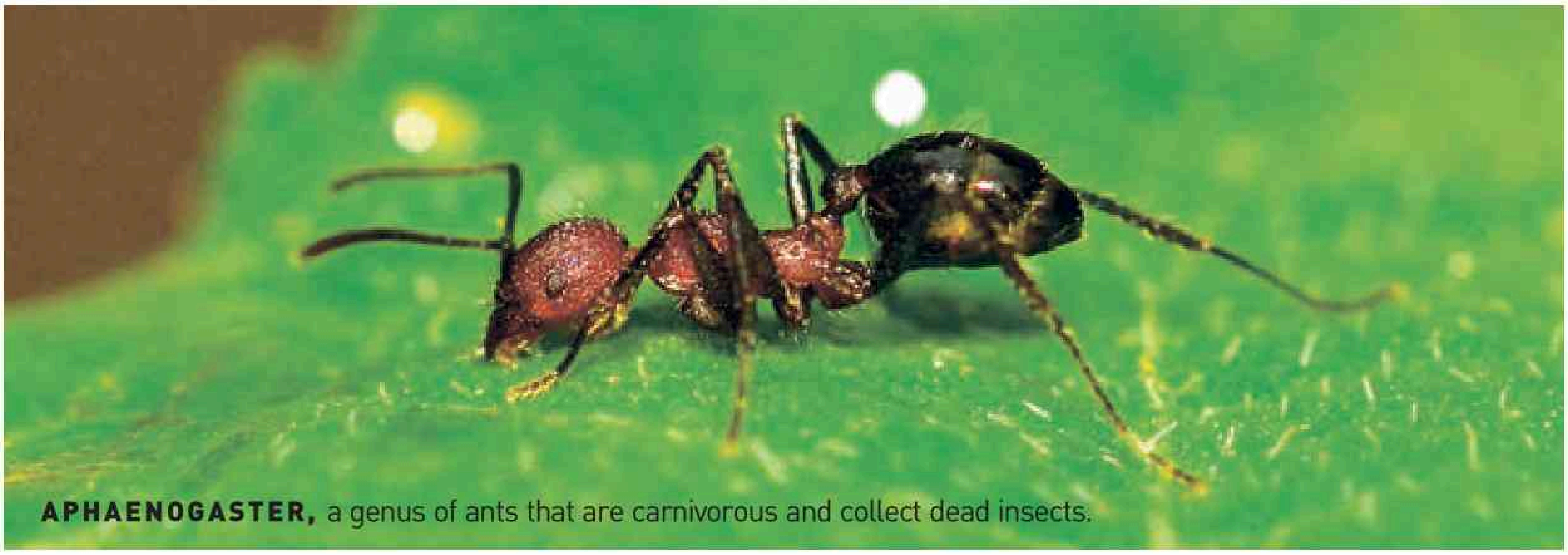
K SADHEESKUMAR

**A SPECIES OF ANT** in the Bothroponera genus.



R. BHANUMATHI

**CARPENTER ANT** (Camponotus pennsylvanicus).



**APHAENOGASTER,** a genus of ants that are carnivorous and collect dead insects.

K. SADHEESKUMAR

K. SADHEESKUMAR

**GRASSLAND ANTS** (Camponotus compressus), a ground-nesting species of ant found in India and South-east Asia.

own. After goldfish and hamsters, it is now the turn of ants to be household pets.

Following in the footsteps of illustrious naturalists such as Rene Antoine Ferchault de Reaumur and William Gould, the entomologists and myrmecologists of today are enthusiastic investigators of the lives and ways of these social insects. Their research has led them into a world that is rich and full of surprises and one that is, even after decades of observation, still full of unsolved mysteries. What is the secret of the huge ecological success of ants? How did their sociality develop? What is their social organisation like in different species? The universe of the ant, when subjected to the most advanced methods of scientific investigation and observed with the magnification afforded by genetics and molecular biology, can be seen in a new light and now reveals a range of ways of life that for many years went unrecognised.

It has long been known that ants were inclined to live in intricately organised societies made up of individuals that cooperated, communicated and divided up daily tasks. Now we also know that they have impressive abilities in finding their way around and amazing ingenuity when it comes to building their nests, finding supplies or exploiting other members of the animal kingdom. We can see, too, that they are capable of

**GHOST ANTS** (Tapinoma melanocephalum).

K. SADHEESKUMAR

**SINGAPORE ANTS** are a pest species in urban areas, known for causing costly damage to structures, vehicles and electronic devices with their chewing activity.

aggression and violence, which can disturb the apparent peace of their colonies and embroil them in fratricidal or matricidal strife. Studies of the sexual arrangements of ants have revealed their strange ways of reproduction and the remarkable stratagems they employ to increase the numbers of copies of genes transferred to their descendants. In this area, as in many others, they display a marked originality. They never cease to amaze those who study them.

Ants are nothing if not ubiquitous. Venture a few steps into any woodland and you will find an ant nest, with all its denizens busily moving about. In springtime, and more so in summer, crumbs of food or grains of sugar left out in the open are soon visited by a long procession of tiny black creatures, scurrying along one after the other, intent on making off with an unexpected hoard of nourishment. Ants, in all their minuteness and their teeming numbers, are just part of the background, familiar, natural, taken for granted. Yet as soon as you start to look more closely, ants turn out to be exceptional in many ways. Their social organisation and their ability to adapt to different environments enabled them to colonise the entire earth tens of millions of years ago. They greatly outnumber all other animals on the planet, including humans.

K. SADHEESKUMAR

K. SADHEESKUMAR

**TH E CREMATOGASTER** brunnea contemta is known to make its nests on trees.

K. SADHEESKUMAR

**THE GRASSLAND ANT** is one of the many species which tends insects like aphids and tree hoppers.

Ants have been recognised as an excellent candidate for insect studies. The insect order Hymenoptera (ants, bees, wasps, and their kin) is receiving attention because it is hyper-diverse and its biodiversity is indicated by the lack of a "unifying common name". In terms of numbers, dominance and ecological importance, Hymenoptera are fundamentally significant. The ant family (Formicidae) alone in this order can be used to exemplify the importance of insects and biodiversity.

Ants strongly influence the functionality of ecosystems. They dominate by their massive biomass, manipulate species composition, influence trophic interactions, possess numerous mutualistic and symbiotic relationships, and shape both the abiotic (for example, moving soil) and biotic (for example, plant-ant mosaics) matrix of community interactions.

The family Formicidae contains 21 subfamilies, 358 genera and more than 11,000 species worldwide. In India, there are 108 genera and 847 species of ants reported so far. Ants are well suited for studies in taxonomy, biodiversity, community composition and biogeography. To accurately assess biodiversity and community dynamics, focal taxa require certain criteria such as ecological significance, diversity and ease of collection. In the past, these efforts were focussed mostly on birds, vascular plants, and mammals. A number of recent studies have shifted the focus to include invertebrates such as beetles, butterflies, ants and aquatic macro-invertebrates. Ants are noted for their proportionally large biomass in ecosystems, making them an important and dominant component of all terrestrial habitats. They also fill numerous niches and often act as "keystone species" and also as predator, mutualist and resource species.

### KEYSTONE SPECIES

Weaver ants (Oecophylla) act as keystone predators. In the role of keystone mutualist, ants are needed by some plants for protection, nutrient recycling and dispersal of pollen and seeds (also known as myrmecochory or seed dispersal by ants).

Ants are keystone resource species as well; they influence soil structure by turning earth and transporting organic material into their nest, acting to fertilise soil. In addition to being a food resource for

K. SADHEESKUMAR

**MERANOPLUS BICOLOR,** an ant species found in many Asian countries, where its habitats range from open grasslands to open-canopy forests.

K. SADHEESKUMAR

**PRENOLEPIS,** a relatively small clade of formicine ants found in southern China and south-eastern Asia.

other organisms (from other arthropods to mammals that specialise in eating ants), ants are associated with numerous organisms, including vertebrates, that require them for their survival. Such interaction can be seen in army ants and ant birds, which follow the raiding trails of army ants. One other example is the location of the nests of some neotropical birds in ant-occupied trees. In addition to high diversity, ants possess a quasi-stable taxonomic and systematic status, which creates a situation where identification is assessable and widely understood.

A study that examines the biodiversity of ants in India is overdue. A better understanding of the current state of community composition across habitats in India needs to be developed. The culture and study of ants in the laboratory is a relatively simple operation. Most insectivorous ant species thrive on this diet when fed three times weekly along with fragments of freshly killed insects, such as mealworms, cockroaches and crickets offered in small quantities. However, the food habits of ants are unknown.

Thoroughly understanding ecosystems has become extremely important as humankind's practices have led to a degradation in environmental conditions. The mass decline of species diversity causes ecological instability, which directly affects all life on earth. Fortunately, considerable research is under way to investigate patterns of biodiversity in the context of the ongoing mass extinction. One emerging method is that of rapid assessments; these studies take a picture of local diversity. Such studies often produce regional lists that not only aid in further research but also are beneficial to local communities by raising local awareness.

Once a common practice in biology, the creation of regional lists for species is not a common practice today, yet the need is apparent. A significant study would be the assessment of biodiversity, community composition, biogeography and other basic investigation of ecology of a regional biota. Such a study would grant researchers a baseline from which to begin more detailed studies. So, those who specialise in this field have their work cut out for them. It will entail locating, naming and classifying the yet undiscovered species, many of which will probably be found in the tropics, where many regions still have much to divulge about the richness of their ant life. Entomologists are convinced that, even in more temperate regions of the world and despite their own ant-like endeavours, several species of ants have still escaped detection.

One of the most fundamental areas in biology is the study of a species; once one knows what something is, the door to understanding it opens. Investigations into taxonomy, phylogenetics, behaviour and natural history have been afforded to relatively few taxa. Even with many scientists studying invertebrates, limited research coverage has been accomplished. The limited treatment may be an artefact of the diversity of these groups. For example, the class Mammalia has about 4,000 species, and the phylum Ctenophora/Cnidaria has about 9,000 species, but the family Formicidae has nearly three times as many species as mammals. The limited amount of research on insects is understandable with such a hyper-diverse group, and further study is needed to understand the broader themes in biological research such as ecology, evolution, as well as medical research (pharmaceuticals), the establishment of what an organism is, what it does, and how it is related to other biota.

Ants are omnipresent, more so than any other animal known to science. We do not know how many of them there are on the planet, as nobody has ever been able to actually tot up their numbers. The importance of knowing what species exist, and in what numbers, is one of the most basic questions in biology and will lead to many more discoveries.☐

*This article is dedicated to E.O. Wilson, the myrmecologist and "Darwin's natural heir" who passed away on December 26, 2021.*

*Dr Vaithianathan Kannan is a wildlife biologist with the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve.*

K. SADHEESKUMAR

**POLYRHACHIS RASTELLA,** a species in Formicinae, a subfamily of Formicidae.(Below) Tetramorium, also known as pavement ants.

K. SADHEESKUMAR